

# Exodus



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANONYMOUS

Like the other books of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament), Exodus has traditionally been attributed to Moses. Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt as described in Exodus and the books following: Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy begins, “The words that Moses spoke to all Israel,” and by late antiquity, Moses had come to be regarded as the writer of all of the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch. In Exodus itself, Moses is described as writing down Israel’s laws as given to him by God. Beginning in the early modern period, scholars have usually rejected Mosaic authorship. Some scholars have regarded Exodus, like Genesis, as a composite book gathered over time from several divergent literary traditions, the most prominent being the so-called “Priestly” source. This compilation is thought to have taken place during the 6th and 5th centuries B.C.E. However, there is no scholarly consensus on the book’s complex prehistory. What’s clear is that the writer(s)/compiler(s) meant to provide a narrative of Israel’s origins and identity as a nation established by God.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context of Exodus is contested by modern scholars. Traditionally, the Israelites’ departure from Egypt is dated to around 1446 B.C.E. This dating is based on a figure found in the book of 1 Kings which counts 480 years from the time of the exodus until the fourth year of King Solomon’s reign. Others have linked the exodus from Egypt with the reign of pharaoh Ramesses the Great, which would place the departure from Egypt around 1260 B.C.E. Exodus itself doesn’t provide much internal evidence because, while it refers to some details, like the cities the enslaved Israelites were building (Pithom and Raamses) and the length of time Israel lived in Egypt (430 years), it doesn’t name any kings of Egypt during this period. While this lack of evidence has led a minority of scholars to question the historical basis of the exodus altogether, many contend that the Israelites would have been unlikely to fabricate a history of slavery and oppression.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Exodus is the second book in the *Pentateuch* (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament), or *Torah* (from “law” or “instruction” in Hebrew). Exodus picks up where Genesis, the first book of Pentateuch, leaves off, and traces how God builds a nation—Israel, his chosen people—out of the descendants of

Genesis’s patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Allusions to Exodus can be found throughout medieval works that draw heavily on biblical imagery, like Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the mystery play *Piers Plowman*. George Eliot’s novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876) features a Jewish protagonist who decides to leave his English upbringing to return to his ancestors’ promised land. In a more general way, the theme of long wanderings toward a promised land features in other literature like *The Aeneid* (1st century B.C.E.) and the 17th-century Christian work *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Exodus imagery featured in early American writings like John Winthrop’s “A Modell for Christian Charity,” a sermon which pictured the Atlantic crossing as an “Exodus” for New England-bound Puritans. The famous African American spiritual, “Go Down Moses,” draws directly from God’s command to Pharaoh to “Let my people go” and may have been used by fugitive slaves to pass messages. William Faulkner’s short story collection *Go Down, Moses*, touches on related themes of Black spirituality and the Southern American legacy of slavery. Robert Hayden’s poem “Runagate” is another example of this visceral connection between the Exodus story and Black history.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Exodus
- **When Written:** 6th–5th centuries B.C.E.
- **Where Written:** Ancient Israel. Some scholars have speculated that Exodus was first written down during the Jewish exile in Babylon in the 6th century B.C.E.
- **Literary Period:** Ancient Near Eastern
- **Genre:** Religious literature, containing elements of historical epic and law.
- **Setting:** Egypt and the wilderness of Sinai in approximately the 13th century B.C.E.
- **Climax:** The giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai
- **Antagonist:** Pharaoh; at times, the Israelites’ stubbornness and disobedience
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Out of Egypt.** The title *Exodus* is the Latin form of the Greek *exodos*, which means “way out” or “departure”—referring to Israel’s journey out of Egypt. The book’s Hebrew title is *Shemot*, or “names,” because of the opening words, “These are the names...”

**Symbol of Liberation.** Besides being foundational for Jewish identity, Exodus is the source of key Christian imagery as well.

Traditionally, the story of the Israelites' passage through the Red Sea has been associated with baptism, and the journey toward the promised land is associated with the earthly pilgrimage toward heaven. More specifically, the story of the Israelites' deliverance from slavery has powerfully inspired the Black Christian tradition in the United States.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Centuries after Jacob's sons first settled in Egypt, their descendants—called the Israelites—are increasing and thriving. When a new Pharaoh comes to power, he fears that the Israelites outnumber the Egyptians and will turn against them, so he enslaves the Israelites and oppresses them with hard labor. He even decrees that newborn Israelite boys be killed and thrown into the Nile.

A Hebrew woman hides her infant son in a basket along the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter discovers and later adopts the baby, whom she names Moses. When Moses grows up, he kills an Egyptian for mistreating a Hebrew and then flees to Midian to escape Pharaoh's wrath. Meanwhile, the Israelites in Egypt cry out to God because of their suffering. God hears them, remembering his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God appears to Moses in a burning bush, telling him that he intends to deliver his people from Egypt—and for that purpose, he's sending Moses to confront Pharaoh. Though Pharaoh will resist, God will display wonders through Moses to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go and worship God in the wilderness. Never an eloquent man, Moses is reluctant, so God assigns Moses's brother Aaron to be his spokesman.

When Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh the first time, Aaron performs the wonder of making his staff turn into a snake, as God commanded him. However, Pharaoh's magicians perform the same wonder, so Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites go. When Aaron turns the Nile's water into blood—the first of God's 10 "plagues"—the magicians again perform the same wonder, and Pharaoh refuses to free the Israelites. Indeed, each time the brothers warn Pharaoh and perform a wonder—causing frogs, gnats, or flies to cover Egypt, or hail or locusts to devastate the land—Pharaoh briefly reconsiders, even claims to acknowledge God's power at times, but ultimately "hardens his heart" and refuses to release the Israelites from bondage.

In the last and most terrible plague, God strikes down all firstborn males in Egypt. After this, Pharaoh orders Moses to take his people out of Egypt. Meanwhile, Moses instructs each Israelite family to slaughter a lamb and mark their doors with its **blood**. When the angel of the LORD passes over, he will see the blood and spare the Israelites from the deadly plague. The people should eat the roasted lamb that night and be ready for a long journey. (This meal should be celebrated annually as part of Passover, in remembrance of God's deliverance of Israel.)

God leads the Israelites out of Egypt toward the Red Sea, traveling before them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of **fire** by night.

After the Israelites have left Egypt, however, Pharaoh changes his mind and decides to pursue them. When the Egyptian chariots are just about to overtake Israel in the wilderness, God tells Moses to lift his staff over the Red Sea. Overnight, a strong wind blows the waters into great heaps, allowing the Israelites to walk through the sea on dry ground. But as the Egyptians pursue the Israelites into the parted sea, God causes the waters to rush back and drown the Egyptians.

In the wilderness, the Israelites must depend on God for food and water. Each morning, God rains manna, a bread-like substance, on the camp, and the people gather enough manna for one day at a time, as per God's instructions. When there's no water, the people accuse Moses of bringing them into the desert to die. But when Moses strikes a rock, God causes water to gush out of it.

The Israelites arrive in the Sinai wilderness and camp before the mountain there. God addresses Moses from Mount Sinai and tells him that because the LORD has delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians, they must obey him and keep his covenant. The people promise to obey the LORD. God calls Moses to the top of Mount Sinai and gives him Ten Commandments the people must follow. The Commandments cover the people's relationship with God (such as worshiping no other gods, not misusing God's name, and observing the Sabbath) and their relationships with one another (e.g., honoring parents, not killing, committing adultery, stealing, lying, or coveting). God also gives additional laws relating to treatment of slaves, willful and accidental killing, and property disputes. God demands that foreigners, widows, and orphans be treated justly. When God brings the Israelites into the promised land, they must be especially careful not to adopt any foreign religious practices.

Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights at the top of Mount Sinai, receiving God's instructions about how the people must worship him. The people should bring offerings of gold, silver, and bronze, yarn, fine linen, acacia wood, spices, and gems. With these objects, they are to build God a tabernacle so that he can dwell among the people. God shows Moses specific patterns for the tabernacle's construction, including the ark of the covenant. God also prescribes patterns for the vestments that Aaron and his sons will wear when they serve as priests for Israel and for their ordination ceremonies. God also commands that daily burnt offerings be made so that he can dwell among the people and be their God.

While Moses is on the mountain, the people grow impatient and demand that Aaron make gods for them to worship. So Aaron makes a golden calf and tells the Israelites that this is the god who brought them out of Egypt. The people revel in front of the golden calf. Meanwhile, God tells Moses what's

happening below and threatens to wipe out the Israelites in his wrath. When Moses intercedes on the people's behalf, reminding God of his covenant, God relents. After Moses descends Mount Sinai, he orders Levi's loyal sons to slaughter rebellious Israelites.

Before Moses leads the Israelites out of Sinai toward the promised land, Moses wants to see God's glory firsthand. God passes before Moses, allowing him to get a glimpse of his divine glory. Then, God makes a covenant with the people through Moses, emphasizing the need to worship God, refrain from idols, and observe Passover and the Sabbath. Afterward, Moses's face shines from the encounter with God. The people give offerings of fine materials, and artisans use these to construct the tabernacle and vestments. Everything is done just as the LORD commanded, and Moses sets up the tabernacle. When the LORD's glory fills the tabernacle, the people see it in the form of a cloud. Each time the cloud goes up, the people set out on the next stage of their journey toward the promised land.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**God/the LORD** – God is the sovereign, omnipotent deity whom the book of Exodus presents as the people of Israel's exclusive object of worship. God's name is often written as "the LORD" to represent the traditional Jewish convention of saying "LORD" (in Hebrew, *adonay*) instead of God's personal name (*YHWH* or "Yahweh"). God first appears in Exodus when he speaks to Moses out of a burning bush in the wilderness of Midian. He tells Moses that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and that he remembers his covenant with his people, the Israelites. God sends Moses to confront Pharaoh for the release of the enslaved Israelites, performing a series of wonders and plagues through Moses and his brother Aaron. The wonders, most of which Egypt's magicians can't replicate, are meant not only to challenge Pharaoh, but to demonstrate that the LORD is the true, all-powerful God. After Pharaoh releases the Israelites, God leads them toward the Red Sea in the form of a pillar of cloud (by day) and a pillar of **fire** (by night). He supplies the people with daily bread, or "manna," to eat. Meeting with Moses on Mount Sinai, God gives ten commandments which the people must obey. He establishes a covenant with the people whereby he will drive out foreign nations before the Israelites, and in return, the people must not worship other gods or intermarry with other peoples, and they must observe the Sabbath and festivals like the Passover. God is so holy that no human being can see his face and live, but he allows Moses to get a small glimpse of his glory. The LORD describes himself as "slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love," though he punishes "the iniquity" of parents upon future generations. The LORD also instructs the people through Moses to build a

tabernacle where he can be worshiped, and he has Aaron and his sons ordained to serve there. As the Israelites travel toward the promised land, the LORD's glory fills the tabernacle the people have built.

**Moses** – Moses, a descendant of the tribe of Levi, is born to Hebrew parents in Egypt. Because of Pharaoh's decree that newborn Hebrew boys be killed, Moses's mother hides him beside the Nile, where Pharaoh's daughter finds and later adopts him. Moses grows up as a privileged Egyptian, but he flees Egypt after killing an Egyptian who had been abusing Jews. After settling in Midian, Moses encounters God in a burning bush, and God sends him to confront Pharaoh, gain the Israelites' freedom, and lead them out of Egypt into the promised land of Canaan. Because Moses insists that he is not eloquent, God appoints Moses's brother Aaron to be his spokesman. Moses is 80 years old at the time of this exodus. Through Moses and Aaron, God performs many miraculous signs and plagues to persuade Pharaoh to release the enslaved Israelites. Moses also receives God's instructions for the Israelites, like the ten commandments and plans for the tabernacle, and instructs the people regarding their obligations of their covenant with God. Moses is married to Zipporah, daughter of Jethro, and has sons named Gershom and Eliezer. Moses is portrayed as a reluctant leader who nevertheless serves God devotedly. At the tabernacle, he speaks with God "face to face, as one speaks to a friend"; on Mount Sinai, he is permitted a glimpse of God's glory. He is even willing to argue with God when he feels the occasion warrants, like when God threatens to wipe out the Israelites for their idolatry in the wilderness, and Moses offers to die in their place.

**The Israelites** – The Israelites are the descendants of Jacob who settled in Egypt for several centuries after the time of Jacob's son Joseph. For hundreds of years after the time of Joseph, the Israelites thrive in Egypt until Pharaoh enslaves them, forcing them to build cities. Even then, the more Pharaoh oppresses them, the more their population multiplies. The Israelites have a covenant relationship with the LORD. When God hears the oppressed people's cries, he remembers this covenant—initially made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and delivers them from their slavery, demonstrating his power to Pharaoh and leading the Israelites out of Egypt and toward the promised land, under Moses's leadership. The Israelites are taught to celebrate their national identity and their unique relationship with God by celebrating festivals like the Passover, which commemorates their escape from Egypt. During their journey in the wilderness, the Israelites are often fearful and complaining, lacking faith in Moses and in God. They even worship a golden calf in flagrant disobedience to God, and Moses must intercede for them. Nevertheless, God continues to lead the Israelites and provide for their needs each day. God also makes a new covenant directly with the Israelites; because God has delivered them from Egypt and drives out foreign

nations from the land they will inhabit, they must obey his commandments and worship him alone.

**Aaron** – Aaron is Moses’s brother. Because Moses is reluctant to speak to Pharaoh and the Israelites, God appoints Aaron to serve as Moses’s spokesman, or prophet. Aaron performs many of the signs and wonders that God commands Moses to do before Pharaoh. Aaron accompanies Moses up Mount Sinai, though only Moses receives God’s commandments directly. Aaron has sons named Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. In the wilderness, these sons are ordained as priests of the tabernacle along with Aaron. Aaron is also Miriam’s brother. Exodus describes the sacred garments Aaron must wear when ministering before God on the Israelites’ behalf. While Moses is delayed on Mount Sinai, Aaron gives in to the people’s demand for gods and fashions a golden calf for them to worship.

**Pharaoh** – Pharaoh is the king of Egypt. Pharaoh mistrusts the thriving Israelites in his nation and determines to enslave and oppress them. When Moses first confronts Pharaoh, Pharaoh doubles down, making the Israelites’ work harder and insisting that the people are merely lazy. When Moses and Aaron perform wonders and bring down plagues to demonstrate that God is the LORD, Pharaoh sometimes relents; however, he always changes his mind and stubbornly refuses to let the Israelites go. After God strikes down all the firstborn males in Egypt, however, Pharaoh orders the Israelites to leave. The Israelites safely cross the Red Sea, but God causes Pharaoh’s pursuing army to drown.

**Jethro (Reuel)** – Jethro, the priest of Midian, is Moses’s father-in-law. (In his first appearance in Exodus, he is called Reuel.) After Moses sets out for Canaan, he sends his wife Zipporah and his sons Gershom and Eliezer to live with Jethro. When Jethro visits Moses in the wilderness, he encourages Moses to set up a system of judges to oversee disputes among the people.

**Jacob** – Jacob is an ancestor of the Israelites, and the son of Isaac. In Genesis, the book of the Bible preceding Exodus, God gave Jacob the name “Israel”; the Israelites are named after their ancestor, and they are the result of God’s promise to bless Jacob’s offspring. Throughout Exodus, God refers to the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

**Joseph** – Joseph was the son of Jacob, and he was the Israelite who originally settled in Egypt. Later, Jacob and all Joseph’s brothers and their families settled in Egypt to escape a famine, and the Israelites thrived there. When the Israelites leave Egypt centuries later, they carry Joseph’s bones with them.

**Moses’s sister** – After the infant Moses is left in a basket beside the Nile, Moses’s older sister keeps an eye on him. When Pharaoh’s daughter decides to adopt the baby, Moses’s sister offers to bring a Hebrew woman (her mother) to nurse him. This sister isn’t named, so it’s unknown whether it’s Miriam or another girl in the family.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Zipporah** – Zipporah is Moses’s wife and the daughter of Jethro. She bears sons named Gershom and Eliezer. When God threatens to kill Moses in the wilderness, she circumcises her son and touches Moses’s feet with the foreskin in order to get God spare Moses’s life.

**Gershom** – [Moses’s and Zipporah’s son. His name means “alien.”](#)

**Eliezer** – Moses’s and Zipporah’s son.

**Abraham** – [Ancestor of the Israelites whose story is told in the book of Genesis. Throughout Exodus,](#) God often refers to the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

**Isaac** – Ancestor of the Israelites, and son of Abraham, whose story is told in the book of Genesis. Throughout Exodus, God often refers to the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

**Shiphrah** – A courageous Hebrew midwife who defies Pharaoh’s order to kill newborn Hebrew boys.

**Puah** – A courageous Hebrew midwife who defies Pharaoh’s order to kill newborn Hebrew boys.

**Miriam** – Miriam is Moses and Aaron’s sister. After the people of Israel escape Egypt by passing through the Red Sea, she leads other Israelite women in a song praising God’s triumph.

**Nadab** – [A son of Aaron, who is ordained as a priest of Israel.](#)

**Abihu** – A son of Aaron, who is ordained as a priest of Israel.

**Eleazar** – A son of Aaron, who is ordained as a priest of Israel.

**Ithamar** – A son of Aaron, who is ordained as a priest of Israel.

**Joshua** – Early in Israel’s journey out of Egypt, on Moses’s command, Joshua chooses some men and fights and defeats the army of Amalek.

**Hur** – Hur helps support Moses during the battle with Amalek.

**Bezalel** – A specially skilled and knowledgeable Israelite who’s tasked with building the items for the tabernacle.

**Oholiab** – A specially skilled and knowledgeable Israelite who’s tasked with building the items for the tabernacle. Oholiab focuses on engraving and embroidering.

**Pharaoh’s daughter** – She finds baby Moses in a basket beside the Nile and adopts him, hiring Moses’s mother to nurse him.

## TERMS

**Ark of the Covenant** – The ark of the covenant is the most important part of the tabernacle that **the Israelites** construct in the desert, in accordance with **God’s** command and design. It is basically a large chest containing the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. The ark of the covenant sits within the tabernacle’s most holy place, behind the curtain. The ark is

made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. At either end of the ark is a golden cherub, and a golden mercy seat is on top, where God meets with the people. The ark can be carried on poles as Israel journeys through the desert.

**Covenant** – In the Book of Genesis, **God** established a covenant, or binding agreement, with **Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**, promising to make a great nation of their descendants, which would dwell in the promised land of Canaan. When the oppressed **Israelites** cry out to God for deliverance, God remembers his covenant and leads his people out of enslavement in Egypt to inhabit Canaan. In return for God's deliverance, the Israelites must uphold their end of the covenant by obeying and worshiping God. They must especially do this by following the Ten Commandments, refraining from foreign religious practices, and observing the Sabbath and other festivals like Passover.

**Passover** – The festival of Passover commemorates **God's** deliverance of **the Israelites** from Egypt. It's called Passover because, in carrying out the final plague against the Egyptians, the LORD passed through Egypt striking down all firstborn males. He passed over Israelite houses because the Israelites marked their doorposts with the blood of a sacrificial lamb, as God commanded them to do. To observe the Passover, the Israelites must also rid their homes of leaven and eat only unleavened bread for seven days, and hold a feast of lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs (in remembrance of their last meal in Egypt). God commands all Israelites to observe the Passover forever.

**Tabernacle** – The tabernacle, or tent of meeting, is **God's** earthly dwelling place. The tabernacle contains the ark of the covenant and is portable, designed to be carried by **the Israelites** en route to the promised land. Among other sacred objects, the tabernacle also contains a golden lampstand and altars for incense and burnt offerings. God gives specific directions for its construction to **Moses**, and the Israelites give offerings of money and materials, with **Bezalel** serving as the main artisan. When God's glory fills the tabernacle, the Israelites can see it in the form of a great cloud.

God had promised to their ancestors hundreds of years before. In this context of oppression, God's power is revealed primarily through his mighty works such as the plagues he brings upon Egypt, his deliverance of the Israelites from slavery, and his feeding the Israelites in their desert wanderings. Many of God's works, like the plagues and God's control over Pharaoh's heart (which he regularly "hardens"), target those who refuse to believe in him. But these works are also meant to teach the Israelites to believe that God "is the LORD" and to trust in him as they journey out of Egypt. In this way, Exodus highlights God's sovereignty not just in order to portray him as a conqueror of enemies, but in order to show that he is worthy of Israel's trust and obedience as they follow him to the promised land.

God's actions serve two purposes: they punish Pharaoh (for oppressing the Israelites) and build the Israelites' trust in him. To accomplish this, he first causes everyone—Egyptian and Israelite alike—to believe in his power. The plagues are a clear example, as they're meant to punish the Egyptians and convince Pharaoh to release the Israelites while providing a public demonstration of God's power. Then, after each of his plagues, God hardens Pharaoh's heart, causing him to refuse to release the Israelites. While this seems counterproductive, it's actually strategic: God causes Pharaoh to stubbornly resist so that he can unleash an escalating series of plagues, showing that he, not Pharaoh, is all-powerful. (Even Pharaoh's magicians can only replicate a few of the plagues themselves, and the Egyptians increasingly suffer while the Israelites are spared.) By revealing himself to be all-powerful over their oppressor, God also strengthens the Israelites' trust in him as their true leader.

Finally, when God draws the Egyptians into pursuing the fleeing Israelites into the Red Sea, he is simultaneously punishing Pharaoh for his obstinacy and proving his power to the surviving Israelites. This plan works; after watching the Egyptians drown, "the [Israelite] people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses." In other words, by punishing the Egyptians in such a public and dramatic fashion, God earned the trust and fear of his own people who now knew his terrible power—as well as his caring protection of them, since they cross the Sea safely.

In showing the Israelites his power, God intends to make them obedient and dependent subjects. While journeying through the wilderness, the Israelites must depend on God as their provider. When God rains quail and manna (miraculous bread) on the people to feed them, he explains, "In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord." In other words, by putting the Israelites in a situation where they would clearly starve if not for God, he's trying to show them that they depend on him for survival.

After teaching the Israelites that he is a trustworthy provider,



## THEMES

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### GOD'S IDENTITY AND POWER

In Exodus, the second book of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, the people of Israel are enslaved in Egypt instead of thriving in the land (Canaan) that

God commands their obedience. When God introduces the Ten Commandments, he prefaces them by saying, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” In other words, since God liberated them from Egyptian slavery, his people owe him obedience; they must now live a certain kind of life—namely, one that acknowledges God’s sovereignty. Sabbath observance exemplifies both dependence on God and worship of him as a sovereign power. God commands Israel, “You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.” The people must rest on the seventh day of the week both to worship God and to show that they trust God—not their labor alone—to provide for them and make them holy.

While the dramatic plagues and escape are some of Exodus’s most memorable stories, the process of conquering Pharaoh is only part of God’s plan. As God reveals himself to be not only powerful but trustworthy, the Israelites are transformed from an oppressed, enslaved people to being free, willing subjects of God.



## REDEMPTION AND DELIVERANCE

The book of Exodus recounts the Israelites’ escape from their oppressors in Egypt, with the help of a series of dramatic plagues. However, the exodus story is nothing like a typical ancient conquest narrative in that the Israelites don’t defeat the Egyptians by fighting—instead, they trust their God to deliver them. In other words, the Israelites’ flight from Egypt is not a story of them defeating their enemies; it’s a story of God confronting, judging, and conquering their enemies on their behalf. Likewise, it’s not just a story of the people’s deliverance *from* an oppressive situation, but also a story of their new freedom to live *for* God alone. In this regard, Exodus can be read as a story of the Israelites’ change of status from oppressed slaves to redeemed servants. Through its emphasis on God as the divine deliverer, Exodus presents the Israelites as a people delivered from slavery in order to serve their God.

God takes the initiative to deliver his people—seeing their oppression and opposing Pharaoh and his armies so that the people will be free to worship him. When Moses is living in the wilderness of Midian, God addresses him from a burning bush, saying, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters [...] I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to [...] a land flowing with **milk and honey**.” God isn’t remote or indifferent to the people’s suffering; he has “observed [their] misery” and “heard their cry” and now “[comes] down to deliver them” from their oppressor.

God confronts Pharaoh, the Israelites’ oppressor, so that the

people will be free to worship God. God instructs Moses to tell Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you refuse to let them go, I will plague your whole country[.]” The result of “[letting] my people go” is not just freedom from slavery, but freedom to worship God.

After judging Pharaoh’s resistance through a series of plagues, God dramatically conquers Pharaoh on the Israelites’ behalf by drowning the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, delivering Israel once and for all. When the Israelites cower at the sight of the advancing army, Moses tells them, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” Notably, the Israelites don’t fight—they “keep still” and watch *God* fight for them. The stages of Israel’s deliverance demonstrate that God is the people’s redeemer who rescues them so they can freely worship him.

God delivers his people not just so they can be free, but also so that they can live holy lives. After the people leave Egypt, God tells them, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant [...] you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” God has “borne” the Israelites and “brought” them (words suggesting Israel’s passivity) so that they can now serve an active purpose—serving him like priests and, basically, representing the holy God by living in a holy manner.

God gives specific requirements for how his redeemed people must live for him. These are clearly presented in the Ten Commandments, which begin, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” Because God is their deliverer, the people must not serve any other gods and must obey the other nine commandments (which focus on their relationships with God and with other people). A specific example is the Sabbath law, which requires the people to stop all work on the seventh day of the week: “You shall keep my sabbaths [...] given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.” Resting on the Sabbath is a way of demonstrating that God is the people’s deliverer—he “sanctifies” them (that is, makes them holy).

Because of the expectation that the Israelites will now live for their redeemer, much of Exodus (at least 11 chapters) is dedicated to specific processes for building the tabernacle where God will be worshiped. These highly detailed chapters aren’t a distraction from the theme of God as deliverer; they actually demonstrate the point that because the Israelites are free, they must now dedicate their lives to worshiping God, not as a demanding taskmaster but as a redeemer worthy of the people’s devotion.



## THE COVENANT

In the book of Genesis, God promised to make the patriarchs (Israel's ancestors) a great nation, one blessed with both land and offspring. In the book of

Exodus, God begins to keep his promise by freeing the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and providing for them in the desert (despite their own recurrent failures to believe and obey). The formal name for this promise is the “covenant,” and it basically stipulates that in response to God’s blessing, the people must obey God. The covenant, therefore, doesn’t just refer to something that happened in the past; it also provides the present basis for the Israelites’ identity and life in the wilderness. For example, the major events of the Israelites’ wilderness journey—like God’s provision for the struggling people, the obligation to obey God’s commandments, and the establishment of a system of worship—all refer back to the covenant. The purpose of the covenant is that the people will live as God’s set-apart, holy people when they arrive in the promised land. With the recurrent covenant motif, Exodus demonstrates the basic pattern of Israelite identity and life: that because God remembers his covenant and blesses the people, they must live faithful, holy lives in response.

Even when the Israelites’ circumstances suggest otherwise, God still remembers the covenant he made with their ancestors. While the Israelites are living in Egypt, they obviously don’t possess their ancestral land. Yet even when the people aren’t living in the land God promised to them in Genesis, God still blesses them with an abundance of offspring: “the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.” It might seem like God has overlooked part of his covenant with Israel, yet their thriving amidst oppression suggests that God hasn’t abandoned them.

God sees his people’s suffering and rescues them, citing his former promise to give them the land of Canaan. God informs Moses, “I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with **milk and honey**.” God not only witnesses what’s happening to the Israelites, he is personally drawing near to do something about it, and to bring them from deprivation to abundance (“milk and honey” refers to the overall fruitfulness of Canaan).

Everything that occurs during the Israelites’ wilderness journey—daily provision, legislation, and worship—highlights the covenant relationship between God and the people. Because of his faithfulness to the covenant, God provides the people with daily food, despite their frequent ingratitude. When the Israelites get hungry in the wilderness, they complain to Moses, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” Though they were released

from slavery so recently, the Israelites only remember the plentiful food in Egypt, not their suffering. Yet, soon after, God rains bread on the people—clearly because of his loyalty to them and not because they deserve it.

Because of the covenant, the people must carefully obey God’s laws. One of the commands God repeats most often is that the people must not assimilate with the inhabitants of the promised land. When God “brings you to the [foreign nations], and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods [...] but you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces.” Because God has fulfilled his promise to restore them to the promised land, the people must fulfill *their* end by rejecting religious practices that might pull them away from God. Indeed, they can’t just ignore foreign practices; they must “utterly demolish” evidence of those gods in order to remove temptation and focus on their covenant with God.

Building on the negative law against serving other gods, God also gives specific, positive instructions for how the people should worship him—namely, by building a tabernacle that houses the ark of the covenant (containing the written ten commandments) and provides a meeting place for God and the people. The tabernacle is connected to the covenant because it’s a visible fulfillment of God’s promise to always be with his people, and a constant reminder of the commandments the people must willingly obey in response.



## MEDIATORS AND THE PRIESTHOOD

From God’s charge to Moses from the burning bush (when he instructs Moses to speak to Pharaoh on his behalf) to the establishment of the Israelite

priesthood many chapters later, Exodus is filled with the idea of mediators, or people who stand between God and humans. This idea is necessary because, according to the Hebrew Bible, God’s immediate presence is too holy for human beings to bear. Through the flawed and frail examples of priests Moses and Aaron, Exodus shows that although God sets people apart in priestly roles, that doesn’t mean that human priests are perfect. Put another way, God’s choice to set apart such people is always gracious, both in the sense that he permits imperfect humans to approach his holiness indirectly and that he accommodates those imperfections. Specific instances of flawed priests (like Moses’s fear and Aaron’s complicity in the people’s idolatry) suggest that when the formal Israelite priesthood is established, it, too, will be subject to human weaknesses, but it should still be trusted as God’s gracious way of dealing with his people. According to the biblical author’s perspective, the necessity of priestly mediation demonstrates human beings’ weakness and corruption, but it also suggests that, by generously approaching humans, God is as gracious as he is holy.

God appoints human beings to serve priestly roles, even though people fill such roles imperfectly. God appoints Moses

as the mediator between himself and the Israelites (and Pharaoh), though Moses shrinks from the task, protesting, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now[.]” God replies that “I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.” In other words, Moses’s lack of eloquence is irrelevant; God will tell him what to say. Similarly, God works through Moses and Aaron to bring down plagues on Egypt, even saying that Moses will be “like God” to Pharaoh—that God’s power will flow through Moses in such a way that Moses will represent God before Pharaoh.

Though weak, sinful human beings inherently struggle and often fail in these priestly roles, God graciously accommodates their failures. When “God directs a battle through Moses, he anticipates Moses’s weakness, ordering other men to support him: “Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed [...] But Moses’ hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held up his hands [...] so his hands were steady until the sun set.” God doesn’t let Israel lose the battle just because Moses is weak, but ensures they’ll prevail by giving Moses backup.

Even priests like Aaron aren’t necessarily morally exemplary people. When Aaron makes an idol during Moses’s absence, he blames the Israelites and gives irrational excuses: “Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil [...] So I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off’; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!” Aaron’s rather pathetic “excuse” demonstrates that Israel’s leaders can fail spectacularly (Aaron couldn’t even stop the people from betraying their covenant with God for a few weeks), but again, God doesn’t crush the people in his anger, but generously grants them another chance.

Because all human beings are weak, God generously institutes the priesthood system as a way of dwelling among his people. The role of the priesthood is particularly seen in the description of Aaron’s vestments, or priestly garments. God instructs Moses, “So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart when he goes into the holy place, for a continual remembrance before the Lord.” The names of Israel’s 12 tribes are engraved on Aaron’s garment, so when Aaron wears it in God’s presence, it’s as if all of Israel stands before God.

God further explains the priesthood’s ultimate goal—because of priests who represent God to the people and the people to God (even flawed priests like Aaron), the people can enjoy the blessing of God’s presence throughout their journey. God tells Moses, “Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate, to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them[.]” The whole point of the priesthood is so that Israel can know God. Though God is too overwhelmingly holy to be directly approached, he makes himself accessible to the people in a

mediated form—a generous gift.

In the end, the priesthood isn’t just about Moses, Aaron, or other ordained men, but the Israelites *themselves* serving in a priestly role of sorts. Like priests, they are specially set apart from other people in order to demonstrate to surrounding nations how to live as God’s people. In that way, the priesthood system itself acts as a kind of training of the Israelites for their future life in the promised land.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### FIRE

Fire symbolizes God’s holy presence. Though God cannot be directly seen, he often appears in the Bible in the likeness of fire. In Exodus, God first appears to Moses in a burning bush (which is ablaze yet not consumed by fire), telling Moses that he’s standing on holy ground. When God leads the Israelites out of Egypt to the promised land—or the “land flowing with **milk and honey**”—he travels before them at night in the form of a pillar of fire. And when God meets with Moses atop Mount Sinai, he appears like a “devouring fire” to the Israelites below. Fire thus symbolizes God’s holy presence and especially his fearsome, untouchable, and purifying qualities.



### MILK AND HONEY

Milk and honey symbolize the richness and plenty of the promised land, as well as the goodness of God’s promises. Several times in Exodus, God describes the land of the Canaanites—which is where he’s leading the Israelites, as he first promised their ancestors—as “a land flowing with milk and honey.” This abundance contrasts sharply with the Israelites’ oppression and slavery in Egypt. But in the promised land, life will be far sweeter and more nourishing: the Israelites will enjoy a fruitful life under God’s provision, in accordance with the covenant.



### BLOOD

In the Book of Exodus, blood has several related layers of symbolic significance: it symbolizes purification, dedication to God, sacrifice, and redemption (the purchase of a life by means of another’s death). On the night that God delivers Israel from Egypt, he instructs the Israelites to slaughter a lamb and place some of its blood on the doorposts of their houses. When the angel of the LORD sees this blood, he will pass over their houses and not kill their male





firstborn (God's final plague against the Egyptians). In the future, the Israelites are to celebrate this observance annually (called Passover) in remembrance of God's redemption—his costly rescue of Israel from Egypt in order that they may worship him.

Blood comes to occupy a central role in Israel's worship in the form of animal sacrifices—for example, when a male firstborn is "redeemed" by the ceremonial slaughtering of livestock. Similarly, sacrificial blood is splashed on the altar, on Aaron and his sons, and even on the people to consecrate them to God. In this system, blood serves as an ongoing reminder of God's holiness and the purity necessary in order to draw near God.

prepares them for the story of how God will lead his people from Egypt back to Canaan, as predicted in Genesis 15. One piece of the story is already clear: after Joseph's generation died, the Israelites increased in number more and more, fulfilling God's promise to grant the patriarch Abraham countless offspring.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor.

**Related Characters:** Pharaoh (speaker), The Israelites, Joseph

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 1:8–14

### Explanation and Analysis

In contrast to the Pharaoh of Joseph's day, Egypt's new king does not look favorably on the Israelites. (This is the meaning of the phrase "did not know Joseph"—because hundreds of years have passed, this Pharaoh couldn't have literally known Joseph). Because the Israelites have increased and prospered so much, Pharaoh feels threatened by them and the possibility of future rebellion, so he enslaves them.

Although historical details surrounding the Israelites' slavery are murky, researchers have identified possible locations of the Pithom and Rameses in the eastern Nile delta. Regardless, Pharaoh's plan backfires, as God blesses the Israelites with ever greater numbers no matter how cruelly they're oppressed. This passage builds narrative tension by pitting a ruthless oppressor, Pharaoh, against the God who promised his people their own land many generations ago. After all these years, will God intervene to fulfill his promises to his people, and if so, how?




## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Zondervan edition of *The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* published in 2009.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

**Related Characters:** The Israelites, Joseph, Jacob

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 1:1–7



### Explanation and Analysis

These opening words of Exodus connect to the Book of Genesis that immediately precedes them. At the end of Genesis, Jacob and 11 of his sons moved from Canaan to Egypt, where another son, Joseph, had gained favor with Egypt's Pharaoh. By starting Exodus with the "sons of Israel" and their households, the author grounds the narrative in Israel's past while also looking to its future, as the named brothers are considered to be the heads of Israel's 12 tribes that later settle in the land of Canaan.

So to a Jewish audience, this opening reaffirms that the events of Exodus are part of *their* story. This audience would likely also be reminded of God's promise in Genesis to give the land of Canaan to his people forever. This opening

●● The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

**Related Characters:** Puah, Shiphrah, Pharaoh (speaker), The Israelites

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 1:15–21

### Explanation and Analysis

Because the Israelites are undaunted by forced labor, Pharaoh turns to a harsher method—genocide. By killing off the Hebrew males, Pharaoh would make sure that Hebrew girls would be forced to intermarry with foreign peoples, which would effectively wipe out the Israelites as a distinct people.

Resistance comes from an inconspicuous source—the Hebrew midwives. Killing Israelite newborns would be a special betrayal of their own people, but above all, the women are motivated by their “fear,” or reverence, for God. Though Pharaoh threatens them for disobedience, the midwives’ demonstrate that their first loyalty is to God, not him.



In this way, the women model faithfulness for all of Israel. Through Shiphrah and Puah’s actions, God makes sure that the Israelites not only survive as a people, but increase even *more* (hence the pointed comment that the midwives themselves get rewarded with families of their own). Indeed, there’s probably a note of humor here, as Pharaoh’s intentions are spectacularly foiled by the Israelites’ irrepressible fruitfulness.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

●● When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?”

**Related Characters:** Moses’s sister, Pharaoh’s daughter (speaker), Moses

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 2:1–7

### Explanation and Analysis

This well-known passage describes the rescue of the infant Moses, decades before he was called to lead Israel out of Egyptian slavery. The narrative alludes to the Noah’s ark story in Genesis, when God preserved his chosen people through a flood. Similarly, Moses—and the Israelites he will lead—are being preserved in the midst of Egyptian hostility.


This is also another example of Hebrew women’s courage in the face of oppression. Knowing that her baby’s life would be at risk if he were discovered, Moses’s mother makes a huge gamble by placing the child within sight of Pharaoh’s household. Moses’s older sister also bravely addresses Pharaoh’s daughter, even though it would be unheard of for a slave girl to address a princess so boldly. When these gambles pay off (Moses’s sister is allowed to bring her own mother to Pharaoh’s daughter to nurse the baby for wages), the original audience of Exodus would see that God blessed and protected Moses. This would also encourage them to believe that God blessed them, too, through Moses’s leadership.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

☞☞ Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, Moses

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 3:1–6

**Explanation and Analysis**

As an adult, Moses left Egypt behind, marrying and dwelling in the wilderness of Midian (on the Arabian Peninsula). However, his peaceful life is suddenly disrupted by a theophany, or divine appearance, in the form of a blazing bush. This is a key passage in Exodus because it's the first time God reveals himself to Moses as the God of his ancestors (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and calls Moses to a special leadership role among the people of Israel.

Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, "the angel of the Lord" refers to the actual divine presence, not just a messenger, so Moses truly encounters God here. God's appearance in fire is also a common symbol—in Exodus alone, God leads the Israelites in a pillar of fire by night, and he appears on Mount Sinai in fire (chapter 19). Fire is a fearful and threatening element, but the fact that the bush isn't consumed suggests that though God is untouchably holy, he will not destroy his people.

God's reference to Moses's ancestors also reminds Moses of God's promise (expressed through a covenant) to bless the people of Israel and suggests that God hasn't been ignoring his people's plight in Egypt.

☞☞ But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,  
and this my title for all generations."

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, Moses

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 3:13–15

**Explanation and Analysis**

God commissions Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand that the Israelites be allowed to leave Egypt. Moses doesn't immediately agree. One of his objections is that he isn't sure the people of Israel will believe him. To assure Moses, God reveals his personal name, YHWH or "Yahweh." The name is connected to the Hebrew verb *hayah*, "to be," and therefore means "I AM." (In Jewish tradition, speaking or writing this sacred name is avoided. When "the LORD" appears in the biblical text, it's referring to the name YHWH.)

Scholars have different suggestions about the meaning of this name, but the basic sense is that God is eternal, unchanging, and the source of life for all that exists. By revealing himself to Moses with this name, God further affirms his promise to "be with" Moses and the Israelites. He also reminds Moses of his "title" as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a reminder that the promises he made centuries ago (to bless Abraham with offspring and land) are still in force. When God tells Moses his name and title, he makes it clear that the Israelites' rescue from Egypt will happen because of God's power and care for the people, not because of their own efforts. Even though he's commissioning Moses to lead the people, in other words, their trust should ultimately be in God himself.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☞☞ God also spoke to Moses and said to him: “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name ‘The Lord’ I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens. I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the Israelites [...] ‘I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.’” [...] Moses told this to the Israelites; but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, Moses

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 6:2–9

**Explanation and Analysis**

At this point, Moses has gone before Pharaoh to demand that the Israelites be freed, and Pharaoh responded by making the slaves’ burden heavier. After Moses complains to God, God assures Moses that he hasn’t forgotten their plight. He does this by reminding Moses that he faithfully cared for the Israelites’ ancestors (the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) hundreds of years ago.

In a somewhat obscure statement, God adds that those ancestors did not know him as “the Lord” (which refers to the divine name “Yahweh”). This likely means that God is revealing himself to the Israelites in a more intimate way.


At the same time, God upholds the same covenant he made with the patriarchs. (A covenant is a formal agreement between parties—in this case, between God and the Israelites, with the stipulation that God will give his people the land of Canaan forever, in exchange for the people’s exclusive worship and obedience.) Even though the Israelites are now enslaved, that doesn’t mean that God is indifferent to their oppression. When God says he “remembers” his covenant, this means he is getting ready to act according to the covenant—to “redeem” his people from slavery and bring them back to the promised land.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☞☞ Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood, and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt. But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the Lord had said. [...] And all the Egyptians had to dig along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the river.

**Related Characters:** Pharaoh, Aaron, Moses, God/the LORD

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 7:20–24

**Explanation and Analysis**



When Pharaoh initially refuses to let the Israelites go, Moses and Aaron perform the miraculous sign that God has ordered them to do—turning the Nile’s water to blood. This is the first of the ten “plagues” that Moses and Aaron bring against Pharaoh in a dramatic showdown between Israel’s God and Pharaoh. Though the text doesn’t plainly say so, the showdown is also between God and the Egyptian gods—here, the river gods like Hapi (deity of the annual flood), Khnum (source of the Nile), and others.

The transformation into blood obviously makes the water undrinkable, threatening people’s lives, but it’s also an attack on the source of Egypt’s material prosperity—the heart of Pharaoh’s kingdom. Such a bold attack is meant to show Pharaoh that Israel’s God is more powerful than the gods of Egypt put together and therefore shouldn’t be trifled with. Yet when the magicians (who probably served the Egyptian gods) are able to perform the same feat, Pharaoh again refuses to let the Israelites go. This development heightens tension, leading the audience to wonder what it will take, and what lengths God will go to, to change Pharaoh’s mind.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months [...] Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male [...] You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the lamb that same night [...] For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord.

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), Aaron, Moses

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 12:1–12

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, God instructs Moses and Aaron how to observe the festival that will become known as Passover. When the Israelites placed some of the sacrificial lamb's blood on their doorposts, God "passed over" the Israelites' houses while executing judgment against the Egyptians (killing all firstborn children). This judgment demonstrated God's wrath against Pharaoh's oppression of the Hebrews. Also, by sparing the Israelites, God also marked out the Israelites as a distinct, chosen people.


In this moment of "passing over," blood identified those households that belonged to God. Over time, Israel developed a more elaborate sacrificial system, and the sacrificial blood of Passover would be folded into that system, in which blood was understood to be necessary to atone for human beings before God. (Atonement is the process by which human beings are cleansed of imperfections and sins so that they can approach a perfect God.) Perhaps living with the lamb for a few days before slaughtering it (from the tenth to the fourteenth of the month) drove home the severity of God's judgment on the Egyptians and reminded the Israelites that lives were sacrificed so that they could be freed. The Israelites were to

continue celebrating the Passover annually in commemoration of God's rescue from Egypt.

☞ For the Lord will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down. You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this observance?' you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.'" And the people bowed down and worshiped.

**Related Characters:** Moses (speaker), God/the LORD

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 12:23–27

**Explanation and Analysis**



This passage further elaborates on Passover observance, with particular reference to future generations. The Israelites are taught to celebrate Passover in the future to help them remember how God liberated them from Egypt. However, it's important that they celebrate in a thoughtful way—regarding Passover as a kind of teaching moment for themselves and their children. Ideally, the observance should clearly communicate a specific meaning ("for [God] passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt") that strengthens Israelite identity and encourages gratitude for God's actions.

The "perpetual" nature of Passover celebration also brings to mind the theme of covenant. According to the Book of Genesis, God promised the patriarch Abraham that the land of Canaan would belong to his offspring forever. The Israelites' deliverance from slavery and exile in Egypt is part of this promise's fulfillment. So commemorating the Passover was part of instilling in children that they, too, were participants in the covenant and would someday pass on the same stories to their own children through household celebration.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

☞☞ Then the Lord said to Moses, “[...] Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.” [...] The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), Pharaoh, Moses

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 14:15–29

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage describes the pivotal moment of the Israelites’ escape from Egypt and one of the most dramatic moments in Exodus as a whole. The quote also emphasizes God’s “hardening” of Egyptian hearts. While this raises a question about the Egyptians’ free will—were they fully responsible for their repeated resistance to God?—that doesn’t seem to be the biblical author’s main concern. The concern, rather, is that God will “gain glory for [himself]” over the Israelites’ enemies. This means that God will not only triumph over the Egyptians by sheer power, but will make sure they know that “he is the Lord.” In other words, they will know that Pharaoh is *not* all-powerful and that God is.

God accomplishes this by causing the Egyptians to drown—wiping out the entire army in moments—after allowing the Israelites to pass safely over the bed of the Red Sea. This image of safe passage through threatening waters again alludes to the story of Noah’s ark in Genesis, and it’s also adopted by later Christian tradition as a symbol of baptism as well as the individual’s pilgrimage through life’s hazards.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☞☞ Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name.

**Related Characters:** Moses (speaker), God/the LORD

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 15:1–3

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage is a song of victory, sung by Moses and the Israelites after God brings them safely across the Red Sea. In ancient epics, a victory song might be delivered on the battlefield after a military triumph. This song inverts that literary convention because victory is attributed not to a human warrior or army, but instead to God himself. In particular, the song praises God as a divine warrior who has triumphed over the Egyptians by “[throwing] horse and rider [...] into the sea,” a vivid picture of Pharaoh’s armies being engulfed by the waves.



The song, then, characterizes God as the singer’s “strength” and “salvation” to whom the individual owes praise. Importantly, though, this same deity is also “my father’s God,” meaning the God of the Israelites’ ancestors. This identification further implies that God’s actions in the exodus are a continuation of what God did for their ancestors. In other words, the exodus is connected to God’s long-ago covenant with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, promising them the land of Canaan. Even though Egyptian slavery made it look unlikely, God has stayed true to the covenant and, like a “warrior,” is now restoring his people to the promised land.

## Chapter 16 Quotes

☞☞ The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day.” [...] So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord.”

**Related Characters:** Aaron, Moses, God/the LORD (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 16:2–7

**Explanation and Analysis**

No sooner has God redeemed the Israelites from Egyptian slavery than they begin to complain about their situation in the barren wilderness. (Just a chapter ago, they sang an exuberant song praising God for the rescue!) Not trusting that there will be enough food for them in the wilderness, they reason that it would have been better to stay in Egypt. Even though they were enslaved there, at least they had enough to eat.

Though the people’s forgetfulness seems ungrateful, God is gracious to them. He causes miraculous bread, or manna, that is enough to satisfy the people’s hunger each day to fall from the sky. This establishes a pattern of daily dependence on God to provide what the people need; as the people learn to trust in God, they should no longer resort to worrying, grumbling, or hoarding.

This daily provision also teaches the people that “it was the Lord who brought you out of [...] Egypt”—in other words, that their escape really was God’s doing, and they can continue to trust God. The passage suggests that like all human beings, the Israelites in the desert naturally struggle with doubt, and that trusting in divine protection is a learning process, not something that happens once for all. Their memories become distorted, leading them to prefer the suffering they knew in the past rather than trusting in present deliverance.

## Chapter 19 Quotes

☞☞ On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. [...] Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), Jacob, Moses

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 19:1–6

**Explanation and Analysis**

Chapter 19 marks the beginning of the second half of Exodus. Now that Israel has left Egypt behind, the dramatic rescue narrative turns to laws governing everyday life as a nation in the wilderness. Before God gives Moses these laws, he reminds the Israelites how they’ve gotten here and where they’re going. At this point, approximately seven weeks have passed since the exodus from Egypt. Their arrival here, and the giving of the covenant to come, would later be celebrated as the Jewish festival of weeks, or Pentecost. Indeed, the solemn language and vivid imagery of God’s address to Moses (“on eagles’ wings;” “treasured possession;” “priestly kingdom”) suggest a festival or ritual occasion.

Here, God reiterates the basis of his covenant with the people: that because he conquered the Egyptians and gathered Israel to himself, the people should obey the covenant he is about to establish with them. If they do this, Israel will continue to belong to God in a special way. While God rules “the whole earth,” Israel is specifically chosen to represent God to the surrounding world. In fact, as a nation they will exercise a “priestly” function marked by distinctive holiness. God gives Israel the covenant so that they have guidelines for living this kind of exemplary life.

## Chapter 20 Quotes

☞ I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), The Israelites, Moses

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 20:2–6

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage includes the beginning of the Ten Commandments. When God delivers these commandments to Moses, he begins by identifying himself as the one who delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. In other words, Israel's obedience to the commandments should be based on the fact that God *first* redeemed the people from oppression. In the special relationship between God and Israel, God has taken the initiative. The people should respond with trust and willing obedience.

The first two commandments listed here prohibit the worship of any other gods and the making of “idols,” or images. These prohibitions are particularly important because God will eventually lead Israel to the land of Canaan, where other deities are worshiped, and religious practices incorporate idols of beings “in heaven above [...] on the earth beneath” and “in the water.” It will be important for Israel to distinguish itself from these nations and their practices, which do not honor their God.

Both the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant (applications of the Commandments that follow in Chapters 20–23) fall into a genre, found in other ancient Middle Eastern literature, called the suzerainty treaty. Such a treaty included the name and titles of the suzerain (sovereign or ruler), the suzerain's past actions on his subjects' behalf, the suzerain's commands, and the blessings of obedience and curses for disobedience. This treaty structure can easily be seen in the quote above, from “I am the Lord your God” to the warnings of punishment and promises of steadfast love.

## Chapter 21 Quotes

☞ When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), The Israelites, Moses

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 21:22–25

### Explanation and Analysis

This law is part of a collection called the Book of the Covenant, which follows the Ten Commandments and applies those Commandments to specific situations Israelites will encounter in everyday life. The laws given in these chapters deal with a variety of subjects—worship, treatment of slaves, physical harm, property, and sexual matters.

The particular law discussed here deals with accidental injury to a pregnant woman. It's a good example of the sort of care for the vulnerable that is found in the Hebrew Bible's laws, attempting to ensure that when such things happen, there are steps to redress the harm done. Similar laws address things like the exploitation of poor wives, the abuse of slaves (who were typically working off debts, not forcibly enslaved), and mistreatment of foreigners.

This law includes a famous principle known as the *lex talionis*, or retaliation law, often summed up as “an eye for an eye.” This principle is actually meant to *restrain* people from acts of revenge. The repetition of phrases like “tooth for tooth, hand for hand,” shouldn't be taken too literally; it's expressing the idea of proportionality—that is, exacting a penalty that corresponds to the crime and no more. This principle also suggests that biblical laws often left room for interpretation and judgment.



## Chapter 23 Quotes

☞ I will send my terror in front of you, and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send the pestilence in front of you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. [...] I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates; for I will hand over to you the inhabitants of the land, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not live in your land, or they will make you sin against me; for if you worship their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), Moses

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 23:27–32

**Explanation and Analysis**

The book of the covenant concludes with God telling Moses what will happen to the Israelites *after* their journey through the desert—a preview of events to come. God explains that he will prepare the promised land for the Israelites' arrival by driving out the current inhabitants through fear. In fact, the promise to “send my terror” and “pestilence” against Israel's enemies sounds a lot like the plagues in Egypt. In both cases, the goal is similar—that Israel will worship God freely. In Egypt, enslavement kept the Israelites from worship; in the promised land, foreign religious practices might “ensnare” them, drawing them away from worshiping their own God. Both situations would threaten Israel's identity as a distinct people.

It's important to remember that the entire goal of the exodus and subsequent journey is that the Israelites will once again inhabit the land of Canaan, living there as a “holy nation” that represents God. Making a “covenant” with other peoples' gods would therefore be disastrous, undermining God's intentions for them (not to mention betraying their existing covenant with him). That's why the people are taught to resist foreign practices while they're still living in the desert, and why driving out “the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites” from Canaan is a deadly serious matter.

## Chapter 25 Quotes

☞ The Lord said to Moses: Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; from all whose hearts prompt them to give you shall receive the offering for me. This is the offering that you shall receive from them: gold, silver, and bronze, blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine linen, goats' hair, tanned rams' skins, fine leather, acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and for the breastpiece. And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them. In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), The Israelites, Moses

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 25:1–9



**Explanation and Analysis**

While Moses meets with God on Mount Sinai, God gives him detailed instructions for building the tabernacle. The tabernacle, or sanctuary, is a vital structure because it's where God's presence will dwell among the Israelites during their journey to the promised land. The quote provides a preview of the next few chapters, naming the various items that will be needed in order to worship God in the wilderness—everything from gold for the ark of the covenant (where the tablets of the ten commandments will be housed) to fine materials for curtains and ingredients for incense.

The people of Israel themselves will provide all these things. Interestingly, God emphasizes the fact that Israelites should bring offerings if their “hearts prompt them”—that is, voluntarily. This contrasts strongly with Israel's experience in Egypt, where they were forced to build cities for their taskmaster, Pharaoh. Though the Israelites must obey God, God ultimately wants people to serve him out of their own free will, not as slaves. In another twist, some of the items—especially of gold, silver, and fabrics—probably originated in the “plunder” the Israelites gathered from their neighbors before leaving Egypt. The oppressor's wealth will be used to serve the liberating God.

☛ Then you shall make a mercy seat of pure gold [...] You shall make two cherubim of gold; you shall make them of hammered work, at the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub at the one end, and one cherub at the other; of one piece with the mercy seat you shall make the cherubim at its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings. They shall face one to another; the faces of the cherubim shall be turned toward the mercy seat. You shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark; and in the ark you shall put the covenant that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites.

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), The Israelites, Moses

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 25:17–22

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes an especially important element of the tabernacle—the ark of the covenant. The tabernacle tent consisted of sections called the holy place and the most holy place. The most holy place is the smaller of the two sections, hidden behind a curtain and containing only the ark of the covenant. This space was the heart of the Israelites’ religious observance; Israel’s high priest would enter it once a year, on the Day of Atonement, but nobody else could access it.

The ark of the covenant was basically a wooden, gold-overlaid chest containing the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were carved. The golden lid of the ark was called the mercy seat. On either end of the mercy seat was a carving of an angelic creature called a cherub. Ancient art suggests that cherubs resembled winged, lion-like creatures with human faces. These fearsome beings guarded holy places (like the entrance to the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis), so their position on the mercy seat is fitting. The reason the mercy seat is so holy is that it’s where God’s presence manifests in order to meet with Moses as the Israelites journey through the desert. Every detail of God’s elaborate blueprints, especially for the tabernacle’s most holy place, constantly reminds the Israelites that God is to be approached with great reverence. Yet the very phrase “mercy seat” is also a reminder that God shows his love for the people by lowering himself to meet with them and journey with them

## Chapter 31 Quotes

☛ “You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death. [...] It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.”

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), Moses

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 31:12–17

### Explanation and Analysis

At the end of God’s instructions to Moses on Mount Sinai, God concludes by reminding the people of the importance of observing the Sabbath, or day of rest. Although God already gave Sabbath instructions in Chapter 16 (prohibiting the people from searching for manna on the Sabbath) and Chapter 20 (the fourth commandment), he elaborates on the subject here.

The Sabbath has a number of important meanings that shape Israelite identity. For one, God says that the Sabbath is given to the people so that they will know that God is the one who sanctifies them, or makes them holy. In other words, observing the Sabbath marks out Israel as God’s chosen people. It’s a weekly reminder for the Israelites themselves, as well as a demonstration to the other nations around them. For another, the Sabbath is linked to God’s own “solemn rest” after making heaven and earth. Thus the day of rest is worked into creation’s rhythm, and it’s fitting for God’s creatures (like human beings) to observe it, too.

Because of the Sabbath’s identity-shaping significance, breaking the Sabbath is a grave matter. Intentionally working on the Sabbath profanes the holiness of the day and requires that the offender be “cut off” so that the holiness of the entire nation won’t be compromised.

## Chapter 32 Quotes

☞ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf [...] They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

**Related Characters:** Aaron, The Israelites (speaker), Moses

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 32:1–6

**Explanation and Analysis**

Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights meeting with God on Mount Sinai, and the people grow restless. They tell Moses’s spokesman Aaron that they’re tired of waiting and implore him to make them a different god. He duly does so, even using some of the gold that the people brought from Egypt in order to build God’s sanctuary.

The rebellious Israelites’ actions show how lightly they take God’s commands; in fact, they don’t want a god who demands anything from them, but would prefer to fashion a god to their own liking—one who passively lets them feast and “revel” instead of calling them to obey and follow. Instead of acting like holy representatives of God, they quickly slide into behavior that’s no different from their neighbors’.

The irony of this passage, too, is that even while the people are in the process of rebelling, Moses is receiving God’s commandments, which emphasize the importance of worshiping God as Israel’s only deity. The golden calf narrative builds tension—will Moses give up on the Israelites when he comes down from the mountain? Will God change his mind about leading them into the promised land, or will he uphold that promise?

☞ But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?’ Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

**Related Characters:** Moses (speaker), Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, The Israelites

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 32:11–14

**Explanation and Analysis**

After the Israelites rebel against God by worshiping a golden calf, God threatens to wipe out the Israelites. Moses quickly jumps to the Israelites’ defense. He mainly does this by reminding God of God’s own promises to Israel. For example, God has frequently characterized himself as the one who brought the Israelites out of Egypt, in order to show that he is God of all. Moses protests that if God wipes out his people, he will be known not as Israel’s deliverer, but as their destroyer. Such a reputation would not suit God.

Further, Moses quotes God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 15, when he promised that Abraham’s offspring would be innumerable, and that they would dwell forever in the promised land. Hundreds of years after establishing that covenant with his people, will God go back on it now?

At this point, God changes his mind. The idea of God changing his mind is always a bit mysterious in the Bible—God is not a fickle human being, after all, yet it’s suggested that his divine will is moved by human pleas. Though the text doesn’t resolve this mystery, the bigger point is that, though God gets angry with human offenses, God does not deviate from his promises, even when people fail to uphold their end of the covenant.

## Chapter 33 Quotes

☞☞ The Lord said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And the Lord continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD (speaker), Moses

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 33:17–23

### Explanation and Analysis

After the Israelites’ rebellion, God says he will no longer accompany them to the promised land, but Moses successfully argues that going to Canaan without God would be meaningless, since it’s God’s presence that distinguishes Israel from all other peoples. When God agrees, Moses asks for a special glimpse of God’s “glory” to embolden him for the rest of the journey. God grants this request, acknowledging that he knows Moses “by name,” indicating that Moses enjoys special divine favor.

God reminds Moses that he is too pure and holy to be seen by weak, sinful human beings. Nevertheless, he will let Moses see his “back,” which is probably best interpreted as a small peek. No other visual description of God is given, except that Moses later comes down from the mountain with a shining face, hinting that God’s presence is characterized by glorious light.

In fact, God’s character seems to be more important than his appearance. What Moses remembers most from the encounter is God’s self-description as “the Lord” who is “gracious to whom I will be gracious” and shows “mercy on whom I will show mercy.” This means that God chooses to show favor to people regardless of whether they deserve it—something he’s demonstrated to Moses and the Israelites time and again. This “grace and mercy” formula is


repeated several times in the Bible as a fundamental statement about who God is.

## Chapter 40 Quotes

☞☞ Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. [...] Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.

**Related Characters:** God/the LORD, Moses

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 40:34–38

### Explanation and Analysis

These closing words of Exodus provide a fitting conclusion for the book as a whole. While they appear anticlimactic at first, they actually sum up the book’s trajectory. After the Israelites were brought out of Egypt, they stopped in the Sinai wilderness. Moses climbed Mount Sinai and met with God for many days, receiving commandments for the people as well as instructions for building the tabernacle in which God would dwell. At last, in the final chapter, the tabernacle is complete, and God’s glory descends, filling the sacred space.

The whole point of leaving Egypt was so that God’s people would be free to worship him. Now, though Israel hasn’t yet entered the promised land, God’s glory dwells with them, a blessing that distinguishes them from other nations and shapes their identity as a people. God’s manifestation in cloud and fire literally guides the people as they travel toward Canaan (going up from the tabernacle when they should move and remaining when they should stop). This means that as they journey, the people can’t lose sight of their goal—living holy lives in the sight of other nations, so they can enjoy God’s blessing no matter where they happen to be.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

The narrative lists which of Jacob's sons traveled from Canaan to Egypt, where Joseph already lived: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. Jacob had a total of 70 offspring. After Joseph and his generation all died, the Israelites continued to multiply until Egypt was filled with them.

A new king, unfamiliar with Joseph, comes to power in Egypt. He tells his people that the Israelites outnumber them, and so they must “deal shrewdly” with the Israelites in case they turn against the Egyptians in time of war. So the Egyptians enslave and oppress the Israelites, forcing them to build cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. However, the more the Israelites are oppressed, the more they multiply. And the more the Israelites multiply, the harder the Egyptians oppress them, embittering their lives with difficult labor.

The king of Egypt instructs two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all newborn Hebrew boys, but to let the girls live. However, the Hebrew midwives fear God, and they refuse to kill the baby boys. When Pharaoh asks Shiphrah and Puah why they've disobeyed his orders, they claim that the strong Hebrew women give birth quickly, before the midwives have an opportunity to reach them. Because of this, God blesses Shiphrah and Puah, and the Israelites continue to thrive. But Pharaoh tells the Egyptians to throw any newborn Hebrew boy into the Nile.

## CHAPTER 2

A Levite couple bears a healthy baby boy, and his mother hides him for three months. But when the baby boy can no longer be hidden, his mother places him in a papyrus basket among the reeds along the Nile. The boy's sister waits nearby to see what will happen.

*When the Book of Genesis left off, the Israelites' ancestors—the founders of the twelve tribes named here—had moved from the land of Canaan to Egypt in order to escape famine, and they prospered there. Before he died, Joseph assured his family that someday God would lead them back to Canaan, the land God had promised to them by covenant.*



*Hundreds of years have passed. While Joseph had found favor with the Pharaoh of his day, the current Pharaoh doesn't know that history, or doesn't care. When Pharaoh oppresses the thriving minority of Israelites, he fulfills what God had told Abraham would happen in Genesis 15. Although it looks like God has forgotten his people, as they're exiled from the promised land, their multiplication hints that God hasn't forgotten them.*



*Since hard labor isn't subduing the Israelites, Pharaoh tries to initiate genocide. Shiphrah and Puah are specifically recognized for their defiance—they fear God more than they fear the king, and their resistance helps thwart Pharaoh and preserve their people. Their heroism models the attitude the Israelites as a whole must aspire to: if the Israelites honor God instead of their oppressor, God will bless them.*



*Levites were descendants of the tribe of Levi, one of the patriarch Jacob's sons. Later, Levites will have a special status among the tribes of Israel as priests and assistants in worship. By introducing Moses this way, the writer suggests that Moses's Levitical status is fitting for a future leader and lawgiver of Israel.*



Soon, Pharaoh's daughter comes to the river to bathe and spots the basket in the reeds. She feels sorry for the crying baby inside and knows it must be a Hebrew child. The baby's sister approaches and asks if Pharaoh's daughter would like her to fetch a Hebrew nurse for the baby. When Pharaoh's daughter says yes, the girl brings her mother. Pharaoh's daughter then hires the mother to nurse the baby for her. She does, and the baby grows up. After that, Pharaoh's daughter adopts the boy and names him Moses because she "drew him out" of the water.

*Moses's rescue, and upbringing in Pharaoh's house, suggests that God has special intentions for him and that the reader should therefore trust him as a leader. Moses's preservation in a basket on the river also echoes the story of Noah's survival of the flood in an ark in the early chapters of Genesis—suggesting God's overarching plan to preserve his people. Again, too, women's cleverness and knack for survival is highlighted here. The etymology of "Moses" is "he who draws out," which hints at Moses's future role (drawing the Israelites out of Egypt).*



One day, when Moses is an adult, he goes out among the Hebrews and sees their slavery firsthand. When he witnesses an Egyptian beating one of his relatives, Moses kills and buries the Egyptian. The next day, he intervenes in an argument between two Hebrews. One of the Hebrews asks Moses if he intends to kill him like he killed the Egyptian. Pharaoh also hears about the incident and tries to have Moses killed.

*According to Jewish tradition, Moses is 40 years old at this time. Even though Moses would have been raised relatively sheltered and privileged in Pharaoh's household (and nothing is told about his awareness of his origins), he unquestionably sides with his people, even at risk of his own life. Again, this suggests Moses is to be trusted as a leader of Israel.*



So Moses flees from Pharaoh and settles in Midian. While he's sitting by a well, the daughters of Midian's priest come to water their flocks, but some shepherds drive the women away. Moses comes to the daughters' defense and waters their flocks for them. Later, the daughters tell their father, Reuel, about the kindly "Egyptian" whom they met by the well. Reuel invites Moses to his home and later gives Moses his daughter Zipporah as a wife. Zipporah bears a son named Gershom, from the Hebrew for "alien."

*Midian is thought to have been a wilderness on the Arabian Peninsula, across the Red Sea from Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula. Wells were traditional meeting places for biblical patriarchs and their future wives, so Moses is being placed within that tradition. Note that while in this scene Moses's father-in-law is named Reuel, in other parts of the Bible it is treated differently: later in Exodus, Moses's father-in-law will be called Jethro, while in the book of Numbers, Reuel is named as being Jethro's father.*



Many years later, the king of Egypt dies. The Israelites groan because of their slavery, and God hears their cry. God remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and takes notice of the Israelites' suffering.

*The reassertion of the covenant resolves the tension that's overshadowed Exodus's opening chapters. God has never forgotten his people (when the Bible says God "remembers," it means he is about to take action on his people's behalf), he knows their oppression, and he remains faithful to them, just as he was faithful to their ancestors.*



## CHAPTER 3

While keeping the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, Moses comes to the mountain of Horeb in the wilderness. Suddenly, the angel of the LORD appears in a burning bush. Though the bush is on **fire**, it's not consumed. When Moses comes closer to look, God calls to him out of the bush. He tells Moses to remove his sandals, because he's standing on holy ground. He then tells Moses that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses hides his face in fear.

The LORD tells Moses that he's seen his people's misery in Egypt. He has now come down to deliver them and to bring them to a new land—one flowing with **milk and honey**—which currently belongs to the Canaanites and other peoples. God will send Moses to Pharaoh in order to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses feels unworthy for the task. God assures Moses that he will be with him. Moreover, as a sign that this is God's doing, the people will worship God on Mount Horeb after their departure from Egypt.

But Moses has questions. For one thing, if the Israelites ask him the name of their ancestors' God, what should he tell them? God replies, "I AM WHO I AM." Moses must tell the Israelites that "I AM" has sent him, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God instructs Moses to tell Israel's elders that God will lead them out of their sufferings in Egypt and into the plentiful land of the Canaanites. Then the elders must approach the king of Egypt and ask that they be allowed to go on a three-day journey into the wilderness in order to sacrifice to their God. However, God knows that the king won't let them, so he will strike Egypt with "wonders." In the end, the Israelites will leave Egypt with favor, taking their neighbors' gold, silver, and clothing with them and thereby "[plundering] the Egyptians."

## CHAPTER 4

Moses asks God what he should do if the elders do not believe that God appeared to him. God orders Moses to throw the staff he's holding onto the ground. When Moses does, the staff turns into a snake. God tells Moses to grab the snake by its tail, and when he does, the snake turns back into a staff. This sign will demonstrate that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob really did send Moses.

*This chapter turns to God's calling of Moses as Israel's leader. In the Hebrew Bible, "the angel of the LORD" is often a way of referring to God. The imagery of fire also appears throughout Exodus to symbolize God's untouchable holiness. In this "theophany," or divine appearance, God specifically reveals himself to Moses as that same God who made a covenant with Moses's ancestors.*



*Throughout the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, "LORD" ("Adonay" in Hebrew) is a traditional way of rendering God's name, "YHWH" (so as to avoid pronouncing it directly). God's care for the Israelites is personal—he describes them as his own people and tells Moses he has witnessed their sufferings. He will also "be with" Moses personally. Their new land will be a place of plenty instead of lack.*



*God reveals his name as YHWH or Yahweh. In Hebrew, these consonants are related to the Hebrew verb hayah, "to be." By calling himself "I AM," God reveals something about his eternal, unchanging character, and also connects back to his promise to "be with" Moses and the Israelites.*



*In his first job mediating between the people and God, Moses must gather the leaders of Israel and convey God's words to them. The order to approach Egypt's ruler is bold—Israel is an insignificant minority—yet it implies that God has a greater claim on the people (to worship and serve him) than their enslaver, Pharaoh, does. Similarly, the idea of "plundering the Egyptians"—as if the Israelites are a conquering army!—seems incredibly bold.*



*God gives Moses miraculous signs that will demonstrate his God-given authority to his fellow Israelites and persuade them to listen to Moses's message. The signs also serve to reassure Moses himself. The staff-to-snake sign will reoccur later, when Moses goes before Pharaoh himself.*



God gives Moses another miraculous sign. He tells Moses to put his hand inside his cloak; when Moses withdraws his hand, it is white and leprous. When he puts his hand inside his cloak again, the skin is restored. If the elders don't believe Moses's first sign, they might believe this one. If they believe neither of these signs, then Moses should pour some water from the Nile onto the ground, and the water will become blood.

But Moses is still troubled. He tells the LORD that he's never been eloquent—he's "slow of speech." The LORD replies that he is the one who gives human beings the power of speech, and he will help Moses speak. But Moses begs God to send somebody else instead. God is angry, but he tells Moses that his brother, Aaron the Levite, who is a fluent speaker, can speak on Moses's behalf.

God assures Moses that the Egyptians who'd threatened Moses's life are dead, so Moses prepares his family for the journey back to Egypt. God also tells Moses that when he performs wonders before Pharaoh, God will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he won't let the people go on their journey. Then Moses must tell Pharaoh that because Pharaoh won't release God's "firstborn son," meaning Israel, God will now kill Pharaoh's firstborn son.

On the way to Egypt, when Moses's family stops to spend the night, the LORD tries to kill Moses. His wife Zipporah cuts off her son's foreskin and touches Moses's feet with it, calling Moses her "bridegroom of blood." Then God leaves Moses alone.

The LORD tells Aaron to meet Moses at Mount Horeb. Moses tells Aaron everything that God has commanded him. Then Moses and Aaron gather the elders of the Israelites, and Aaron speaks the words that God had spoken to Moses and performs the signs. The elders believe, and they worship God, knowing he has heeded their misery.

*Subsequent signs—of a diseased hand and water turned to blood—might persuade skeptical holdouts of Moses's authority. All three of the miraculous signs show God's power over creatures, people, and elements. These signs also foreshadow God's deliverance of Israel through miraculous "plagues."*



*Moses grew up in Pharaoh's court, so he knows that his speaking ability won't measure up. His continued reluctance shows his weakness as a leader and his need of God's power. God is angry because Moses ought to trust God enough by now to obey his command. Nevertheless, God graciously offers an alternative.*



*Recall that Moses fled to Midian because he killed an Egyptian who abused a Hebrew. Just returning to Egypt is a risky move. What's more, Moses knows in advance that his mission won't be successful at first: God will cause Pharaoh to resist him ("harden his heart"), escalating the conflict. "Firstborn son" refers to the Israelites' special relationship with God, implying that the Egyptian people as a whole will be threatened if Pharaoh continues to mistreat Israel.*



*In Genesis, God required that males be circumcised as a sign that they're in a covenant with him. Disobedient people and families would be "cut off" from their people. That's presumably what's happened here—for whatever reason, Moses hadn't circumcised his son. Like other quick-thinking, resourceful women in Exodus, Zipporah intervenes to spare Moses's life.*



*Mount Horeb (later Mount Sinai) is associated with God's revelation of himself, his promise to deliver his people, and his covenant with them. Moses tells Aaron about God's commands at Mount Horeb, where God commissioned Moses initially, and Aaron undertakes his duties as Moses's spokesman for the first time. Mount Horeb is also where the Israelites will worship God after they've been freed from Egypt.*





## CHAPTER 5

Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh, telling him that God has said, “Let my people go” so that they can go into the wilderness and worship. Pharaoh replies that he doesn’t know the LORD—why should he listen? When Moses and Aaron persist, Pharaoh demands that the Israelites return to their work. That day, he tells the people’s taskmasters that they must no longer supply the Israelites with straw for their brickmaking; the Israelites will have to gather it for themselves. Nevertheless, the people must produce the same quantity of bricks as before—they are just lazy, and that’s why they’re asking permission to go away and worship God.

So the taskmasters tell the Israelites to gather their own straw and make the same quantity of bricks. When the Israelites struggle to fulfill this quota, Pharaoh’s taskmasters beat the Israelites’ supervisors. When the supervisors complain of this unjust treatment, Pharaoh insists that the Israelites are simply lazy. In turn, the supervisors accuse Moses and Aaron of making things worse for them. Moses prays to the LORD, lamenting that God has not yet done anything to deliver his people.

*Moses and Aaron have their first meeting with Pharaoh, and it goes as God foretold—Pharaoh stubbornly refuses to release the Israelites. Besides demonstrating God’s control over the situation, this also sets the tone for Moses’s coming struggle with Pharaoh. In fact, Pharaoh cruelly doubles down on his oppression of the slaves.*



*Moses’s struggle with Pharaoh and the resentful supervisors establishes that his role won’t be easy. Even when Moses advocates for them, the people won’t always appreciate it; and from Moses’s perspective, God’s power and care won’t always be obvious. Right now, in fact, it looks like God has just made the Israelites’ situation harder.*



## CHAPTER 6

The LORD tells Moses that, in fact, Pharaoh will drive the Israelites out of Egypt by a mighty hand. He also tells Moses that though he appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, he did not make himself known to them as “the LORD.” He also established a covenant with Moses’s ancestors to give them the land of Canaan. Hearing the Israelites’ groaning in Egypt, the LORD has now remembered his covenant. Moses tells the Israelites of God’s coming deliverance. However, the people don’t listen, because their spirits are broken.

The chapter then lists Moses and Aaron’s genealogy, including the heads of their ancestors’ houses. The genealogy descends from Levi through his son Kohath and Kohath’s son Amram. Amram married Jochebed, his father’s sister. Aaron married Elisheba and had several children: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. Eleazar had a son named Phinehas. This very Moses and Aaron were charged with speaking to Pharaoh, and they obeyed God’s command.

*God reassures Moses that what he’s promised will come about. God promises that just as he’s cared for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in past generations, he will care for the Israelites now, upholding his covenant by giving them the land of Canaan. God’s statement that Moses’s ancestors didn’t know him as “the LORD” is a little obscure. A likely interpretation is that God has now revealed himself to his people in a more personal way than before (hence identifying himself as “the LORD,” or YHWH). In any case, so much time has passed, and the Israelites are so oppressed, that it’s difficult for the people to trust that God’s promises to them still apply.*



*Family histories are important in the Bible because they connect people to God’s concrete actions in the past (like his covenant with their ancestors). This genealogy helps the audience know where Moses and Aaron fit into Israel’s history (that is, in the tribe of Levi). Aaron’s four sons, and his grandson Phinehas (who shows up in the Book of Numbers), are specifically named because of their future prominence as priests.*



## CHAPTER 7

The LORD tells Moses that he has made Moses “like God” to Pharaoh, and Aaron will be Moses’s prophet. When God speaks to Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron, God will harden Pharaoh’s heart and perform signs and wonders in Egypt. Then he will bring the Israelites out of Egypt, and the Egyptians will know that he is the LORD. At this time, Moses is 80 years old and Aaron is 83.

The LORD commands Moses and Aaron to go before Pharaoh and perform the wonder of the staff becoming a snake, so they do. Seeing this, Pharaoh calls his wise men and sorcerers, and these magicians accomplish the same wonder. Aaron’s snake gobbles up the magicians’ snakes. Nevertheless, Pharaoh’s heart is hardened, and he doesn’t listen.

The LORD tells Moses that because Pharaoh’s heart is hardened, he must approach Pharaoh beside the Nile tomorrow and perform a wonder—striking the water with his staff and turning it into blood. By this sign, God tells him, Pharaoh will know that he is the LORD. Aaron must also extend his staff over all the bodies of water in Egypt so that they, too, will become blood. When Moses and Aaron do these things, all the fish in the river die, and the Nile’s water becomes undrinkable. But when Pharaoh’s magicians perform the same wonder, his heart remains hardened. Seven days pass.

## CHAPTER 8

Then the LORD tells Moses to approach Pharaoh again. If Pharaoh refuses to let the people go this time, God will plague Egypt with frogs. Frogs will fill the Nile, and they will even enter people’s houses, bedrooms, and kitchens. Aaron stretches out his staff and causes frogs to cover the land, but Pharaoh’s magicians do the same. Pharaoh begs Moses and Aaron to pray so that the LORD will remove the frogs. Moses promises to do so; when the frogs die, then Pharaoh will know that there’s nobody like God. But when Egypt is filled with piles of stinking frogs, Pharaoh’s heart hardens again.

*God reaffirms what he’s already told Moses—that he’ll speak to Pharaoh through Moses, Aaron will serve as the spokesman, and Pharaoh won’t cooperate. Though God doesn’t explain how, God makes clear that he will somehow perform his work through amplifying Pharaoh’s resistance in order to ultimately show Pharaoh once and for all that he is truly God (recall Pharaoh’s protest in chapter 5 that he doesn’t know God).*



*Moses and Aaron reprise the snake-to-staff miracle, this time to persuade Pharaoh of God’s power. Pharaoh’s “magicians” were probably priests of some kind who served the Egyptian gods. Even though these magicians can perform feats equivalent to Aaron’s, Aaron’s miraculous snake overwhelms theirs—demonstrating that their God is more powerful than Egypt’s gods.*



*After the first sign fails to convince Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron bring the first of ten plagues with which God will afflict Egypt: turning Egypt’s precious water sources into blood. This plague is not only a demonstration of God’s power, but an expression of God’s judgment that causes all Egyptians to suffer. God fulfills what he threatened to do in chapter 4—if Pharaoh causes God’s children to suffer, then a similar threat will befall Pharaoh’s.*



*Moses and Aaron bring about the second of the ten plagues, causing frogs to overrun Egypt. Again, the Egyptian magicians can replicate the miracle. This time, however, Pharaoh reacts differently than before, seeming to acknowledge God’s unique power for the first time. However, his change of heart is short-lived, and he still refuses to let the people go. The multiplying frogs were probably meant to mock Heqet, the Egyptian fertility goddess who was often portrayed as a frog.*



Then the LORD tells Moses to have Aaron strike the ground; the dust will become gnats, which will cover Egypt. When Aaron does so, both humans and animals are soon covered with gnats. This time, Pharaoh's magicians cannot replicate the plague. They tell Pharaoh that this wonder surely comes from God. But Pharaoh still refuses to listen.

*The third plague is different—the magicians fall short for the first time. In this case, the magicians try to warn Pharaoh—they see that Israel's God is more powerful, and that by remaining stubborn, Pharaoh brings harm on his own people. But Pharaoh's defiance blinds him to this advice.*



The LORD tells Moses to go to Pharaoh early the next morning. Moses must warn Pharaoh that if he doesn't let the Israelites go, God will send swarms of flies on the people, into their houses, and throughout the land. The land of Goshen, where the Israelites live, will be spared this plague, so that a distinction can be made between the Egyptians and the Israelites. The next day, flies swarm across Egypt, just as God had said.

*By this point (the fourth plague), a pattern is established: Moses demands freedom, Pharaoh refuses, Moses unleashes a plague, Pharaoh appears to soften, but then his heart hardens again. In this plague, one difference is the obvious sparing of the Israelites (who are concentrated in Goshen, on the eastern Nile Delta), which demonstrates that God sets his chosen people apart in a special way; he has a purpose for them.*



Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron and tells them to offer sacrifices to God here in Egypt. But Moses argues that the Israelites' sacrifices will offend the Egyptians; therefore, they must journey three days into the wilderness. Pharaoh concedes to let the Israelites worship in the wilderness, as long as they don't go far, and they must pray for Egypt's relief. So Moses prays, and the flies disappear. Once again, however, Pharaoh hardens his heart and won't let the people go.

*Another notable detail of the fourth plague is that Pharaoh tries to negotiate—the Israelites can worship as they want, they just can't leave Egypt. Moses points out that Israelite practices would offend the Egyptians' sensibilities, but the bigger point is that Israel must obey God's whole command—to go out and worship—not just part.*

## CHAPTER 9

The LORD tells Moses to approach Pharaoh again. If Pharaoh refuses, the LORD will strike Egypt's livestock with a deadly pestilence. The Israelites' livestock, however, will be spared. The next day, this very thing occurs. Yet Pharaoh's heart is hardened again.

*The fifth plague, like the previous one, draws a visible distinction between Egyptians and Israelites. That is, the Israelites' healthy livestock plainly show that God sides with Israel and judges Egypt.*



Then the LORD tells Moses to take handfuls of soot from the kiln and throw it into the air in Pharaoh's presence. The soot will become a fine dust over the land, which will cause festering boils on people and livestock. Moses does so, and even the magicians are afflicted, preventing them from performing the same wonder. Yet the LORD hardens Pharaoh's heart and he doesn't listen to Moses.

*Boils, the affliction of the sixth plague, don't just affect the land or livestock, but the people themselves—the plagues are ramping up in intensity. As a result, the magicians can't even try to replicate the feat. As the suspense keeps mounting, it's increasingly clear that God's power dwarfs that of Egypt.*



The LORD tells Moses to approach Pharaoh early the next morning and tell him that this time, if he doesn't let the Israelites go, God will send plagues directly on Pharaoh, his officials, and his people. Until now, he has refrained, so that Pharaoh could witness God's power. But because Pharaoh remains stubborn, God will send a deadly hail on Egypt to kill anything that's exposed. So the next day, Moses stretches his staff toward heaven, causing thunder, hail, and fire to rain from heaven. Egypt has never seen such hail, with fire flashing in its midst. Anything in the open is struck dead, and crops are damaged. Yet Goshen remains unscathed.

Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron and tells them "this time" he has sinned—the LORD was right to send this plague. He asks them to pray to God on his behalf, and he will send them off to worship in the wilderness. Moses promises to pray, but he knows that Pharaoh and his officials don't truly fear God. He goes out of the city and prays, and the thunder, hail, and fire cease. But when Pharaoh sees that the plague has passed, his heart is hardened again.

## CHAPTER 10

The LORD tells Moses to go before Pharaoh again. He says that he has hardened Pharaoh's heart and his officials' hearts in order to show these signs, and so that Moses can tell his offspring how God made fools of the Egyptians, and so that he will know that God is the LORD. So Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh and say that God wants to know how long Pharaoh will refuse to humble himself. If he still refuses to let the Israelites go, God will bring a plague of locusts, which will devastate the harvest and fill people's homes.

Pharaoh's officials beg him to let the Israelites go, because Egypt is obviously ruined. But when Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron back, he refuses to let all the Israelites go, because they clearly have some evil purpose in mind; the men alone can go. After Moses and Aaron leave Pharaoh, the LORD tells Moses to stretch out his staff over the land, and he will send the locusts. By the next day, the entire land of Egypt appears black with the vast swarm of locusts, which gobble up all remaining greenery. Pharaoh quickly confesses his sin, and Moses prays accordingly; God sends a great wind that blows the locusts into the Red Sea. But he also hardens Pharaoh's heart yet again.

*The description of this seventh plague is more detailed than those that have come before. For the first time, God (through Moses) explains the purpose behind the plagues—to demonstrate his power to Pharaoh. But because Pharaoh hasn't surrendered so far, God will now allow plagues to impact Pharaoh more directly. Indeed, widespread death and destruction (pointedly sparing Israel) shows that the situation is escalating.*



*Though Pharaoh appears to be repentant, he only takes responsibility for the current disaster; he doesn't acknowledge that his whole pattern of stubborn resistance has been wrong. Note that while Pharaoh is passive in his heart's "hardening," he's still held responsible for his subsequent behavior—the biblical author doesn't seem concerned about any discrepancy between God's will and human free will.*



*The introduction to the ninth plague, locusts, emphasizes the purpose of these disasters: not simply to punish Pharaoh, but to show both Egyptians and Israelites God's greatness. This is also why God "hardens" Pharaoh's heart—the goal is to prolong Pharaoh's natural resistance so there's even more opportunity for God to make "fools" of his enemies. In fact, there's a darkly comic undertone to the contrast between God's might and Pharaoh's pretensions of greatness.*



*As before, Pharaoh's subordinates ask him to change his behavior, a desperately bold move. And again, Pharaoh appears to soften, but his so-called compromise is a non-starter—God didn't order the men to worship him in the wilderness, but the entire people of Israel. Pharaoh's stipulation shows that he still thinks that he—and not God—is in charge of the Israelites. So Moses lets loose another plague, this one so devastating that the audience must wonder what it will take to finally soften the despotic king.*



Next, the LORD tells Moses to stretch his hand toward heaven so that Egypt will be covered with “a darkness that can be felt.” Moses does so, and for three days, Egypt is covered with such darkness that the people can’t move or see one another. Yet the Israelites have light in their homes. Pharaoh calls Moses and says that all the Israelites may go to worship, but they must leave their flocks and herds behind. Moses insists that the livestock must go, too, so that the Israelites can sacrifice to God. But God hardens Pharaoh’s heart, and Pharaoh orders Moses out of his presence.

*The ninth plague, darkness, brings ordinary life in Egypt to a halt and also foreshadows the deadlier plague yet to come. Again, the Israelites are spared, set apart to show that they’re God’s special people. Pharaoh keeps looking for ways to retain the Israelites as a workforce, this time by holding onto their livestock. By hardening Pharaoh’s heart again, God shows that he intends for Israel to serve him exclusively—they can’t serve both God and Pharaoh.*



## CHAPTER 11

The LORD tells Moses that he is going to bring a final plague upon Egypt, after which Pharaoh will eagerly drive the Israelites away. He also tells Moses to instruct the people to ask their neighbors for silver and gold items. Moses tells Pharaoh God’s message for him: at midnight, the LORD will go throughout Egypt and kill every firstborn, from Pharaoh’s firstborn to the firstborn of the lowest slave to the firstborn of the livestock. Yet the Israelites will remain unharmed, in order to show that God makes a distinction between the two nations.

*The final, most fearsome plague is contained within a more elaborate, even darker narrative which extends into the next chapter. This chapter focuses on Moses’s warning from God that all firstborn animals and human beings will be killed. As he warns Pharaoh, Moses also prepares the Israelites for departure from Egypt. (God foretold this “plundering” of the Egyptians at the burning bush, in Chapter 3.)*



## CHAPTER 12

The LORD tells Moses and Aaron that for Israel, this month will mark the beginning of the year. On the tenth of the month, every Israelite family must take an unblemished year-old lamb. On the fourteenth day, every household must slaughter their lamb at midnight, then place some of its blood on the doorposts and lintel of the house. They must roast the lamb that night with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, then eat it in a hurry while dressed for travel. This is the LORD’s Passover, because the LORD will pass through Egypt that night, striking down every firstborn among both humans and animals. When the LORD sees the blood on the Israelite houses, he will pass over them.

*Before the outbreak of the plague, there’s a pause in the narrative for a key Jewish origin story—the institution of the Passover festival. When God strikes down the Egyptian firstborn, he will “pass over” the Israelites’ houses because they are marked with a sacrificial lamb’s blood. At the time, the blood might simply have signified a household’s obedience to God’s command. Later, as Israel’s sacrificial system developed, observant Jews would look at the Passover blood as a reminder that a life had been sacrificed to redeem theirs.*



The Passover will be a day of remembrance for Israel, a festival to be observed forever. For seven days (from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day), they must eat unleavened bread, having removed all leaven from their houses—anyone who eats leavened bread will be cut off. The first and seventh days will be marked by solemn gatherings.

*Passover is to be celebrated between the 14th and 21st days of the Hebrew lunar month of Abib or Nisan. Unleavened bread is eaten to commemorate the fact that the Israelites had to flee Egypt in a great hurry. Though it’s not clear what being “cut off” means in this context (whether physical separation, actual death, or something else), the offender is removed from the community’s solemn celebration as a warning against breaking the covenant with God.*



Moses calls Israel's elders and tells them to choose lambs for the families. They must also dip a bunch of hyssop into the lamb's blood, mark the door of the house, and stay inside until the next morning. The Israelites must always celebrate this ordinance. In the future, when their children ask them its purpose, they must explain that it's a Passover sacrifice to the LORD, in remembrance of the night he struck down the Egyptians while sparing Israel. After hearing this, the people worship God and do just as he commanded through Moses and Aaron.

At midnight, the LORD strikes down all the firstborn of Egypt. A cry is heard throughout the land, because no Egyptian household is untouched. Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron and tells them to take their people and livestock and go. In the meantime, the Israelites have gained favor in the Egyptians' sight, collecting silver and gold jewelry and clothing from their neighbors. In this way, they "plunder" the Egyptians.

About 600,000 Israelite men, besides children, travel from Rameses to Succoth, along with a mixed crowd and huge flocks and herds. Because they leave in a hurry, they only have unleavened dough to bake and no other provisions. At this time, the Israelites have lived in Egypt for exactly 430 years.

The LORD instructs Moses and Aaron that no foreigners may eat the Passover, but any slaves may do so after they have been circumcised. Each household should eat the Passover inside one house, and all of Israel should celebrate it. Foreigners living among the Israelites may join in, but their males must first be circumcised; one law must apply to native and foreigner alike. The Israelites do just as the LORD commands them.

*Moses's instructions emphasize the importance of passing down the Passover story to one's children. In other words, observing the Passover isn't a matter of rote repetition, but of narrating Israel's history. Such narration teaches future generations their place within the active covenant between Israel and their God.*



*The account of the Egyptians being struck down is told sparingly, emphasizing the horror of the event. It comes against the backdrop of God's promise to Abraham centuries ago, as told in Genesis 15, that Abraham's descendants would be brought out of the land of their oppressors with great wealth. Ironically, these Egyptian riches will later help the Israelites construct the materials they need to worship God on the way to the promised land. These events also enact God's bold and seemingly unlikely claim that the Israelites would "plunder" their oppressors, and in so doing emphasize God's power.*



*At the beginning of Exodus, it was noted that when Jacob's offspring first settled in Egypt, they numbered 70. Scholars have questioned whether the figure of 600,000 can plausibly be taken at face value. The main point of such massive numbers, however, is to show how much God has blessed Israel in the centuries after Jacob's life. The scarcity of provisions anticipates God's coming care for the Israelites in the wilderness.*



*Before the Israelites go, God gives further stipulations regarding future celebrations of the Passover. This is because the Passover will be key to Israelite identity, especially during the wanderings in the desert. The rules about slaves and foreigners stress the importance of being identified with God's people in order to join in Israelite celebrations—that is, ethnic diversity is assumed, but non-Israelite males must nevertheless join the covenant through the ritual of circumcision.*



## CHAPTER 13

The LORD tells Moses to consecrate to God all the Israelites' firstborn, among both humans and animals. Moses instructs the people to remember this day, in the month of Abib, that God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. God will bring them into the land of the Canaanites, the land he promised to their ancestors, one flowing with **milk and honey**. The Israelites should tell their children that they do this because of what the LORD did for their people, and that it should be an annual observance and reminder.

*"Consecrate" means "to make holy." To do so involves sacrificing firstborn animals and sacrificing an animal on behalf of a firstborn child. This ceremony is a reminder that when God struck down the Egyptian firstborn, he spared the Israelites. God also reminds the Israelites to continue observing the Passover in remembrance of the exodus, God's faithfulness to the covenant he made with their ancestors, and the plentiful provisions he provides (symbolized by milk and honey).*



After Pharaoh released the Israelites, God leads them in a roundabout way so that they won't face war with the nearby Philistines and become disheartened. Instead God leads them through the wilderness toward the Red Sea. As they go, Moses carries Joseph's bones, since Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath to that effect. After leaving Succoth, the Israelites camp at Etham on the edge of the wilderness. The LORD leads the people by traveling before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of **fire** by night.

*God shows the Israelites his kindness right away, by sparing them having to fight immediately after setting out on their journey. By leading them toward the Red Sea, however, he's leading the people into a different challenge, as the next chapter will show. By directing the people's path and leading them in the form of a pillar, God oversees each step of the journey, not only ensuring their survival, but leading them into experiences that shape their identity as a people. In Genesis 50, Joseph had his offspring promise to carry his remains back to Canaan, and the promise is kept here.*



## CHAPTER 14

The LORD tells Moses to have the people camp at Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the Red Sea. Then Pharaoh will think that the Israelites are just wandering aimlessly. God will harden Pharaoh's heart so that Pharaoh will pursue the people. God will thereby "gain glory" for himself over the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know that he is God.

*The precise route of the flight from Egypt isn't known, and modern scholars have debated the details. The Israelites are thought to have stopped at the northern, narrower end of the Red Sea. God tells Moses that he isn't done with Pharaoh yet—he has a further plan to reveal himself to Egypt as the all-powerful God.*



Indeed, when Pharaoh and his officials hear that the Israelites are gone, they have a change of heart, deciding they shouldn't have let them leave Egypt's service. So Pharaoh leads his army of chariots and chases the Israelites, overtaking them by Pi-hahiroth. When the Israelites see the Egyptians getting closer, they cry fearfully to the LORD. They ask Moses why he has brought them into the wilderness to die—wouldn't it have been better to be enslaved in Egypt? Moses tells the people to remain strong and see what God will do on their behalf.

*The narrative reaches one of its dramatic high points with Israel's decisive "exodus" from Egypt. Each character in the story acts according to the role one would expect by this point in the story: Pharaoh changes his mind, the Israelites are frightened and complain to Moses, and Moses (who's matured in his role from his earlier, more timid days) encourages the people to look to God. Notably, Moses tells the people to watch passively as God fights for them. This overturns ancient battle narrative conventions, as the people themselves aren't triumphant; in fact, their weakness is emphasized. It is in following God that they are made strong.*



The LORD tells Moses to lift his staff over the Red Sea and divide its waters, so that the Israelites can pass over on the dry ground. He will then harden the Egyptians' hearts so that they will pursue the Israelites, and God will gain glory over the Egyptians. The pillar of cloud then moves behind the Israelites, between their army and Egypt's army. Moses stretches out his staff over the Red Sea, and a strong east wind blows all night, causing the waters to divide and reveal dry land.

*Though Moses parts the Red Sea by lifting his staff, it's God who works through this gesture to bring about the Israelites' deliverance. God also brings about his larger purpose: "gaining glory" over the Egyptians by once more hardening their hearts, thereby setting the stage for a conclusive revelation of himself as God.*



The Israelites cross the dry land, the waters forming a wall on either side. The Egyptians, including all of Pharaoh's horses and chariots, follow them. The LORD causes the Egyptians to panic as their chariots bog down. They decide to flee, because it's obvious that the LORD is fighting for Israel. Then Moses stretches out his staff again, and the waters cover the Egyptians, killing everyone. Israel sees that God has accomplished a victory for them, and they believe in God and in Moses, God's servant.

*The parting of the waters is clearly a supernatural event, the waters forming walls of protection for the fleeing Israelites, and then becoming the medium of God's judgment on the pursuing Egyptians. Though the doomed Egyptians recognize God's power in the end, the more important point is that the Israelites believe in him as their God and in Moses as their God-given leader. This recognition will be key to the Israelites' cohesion as a people, and to their survival, in the coming wilderness journey.*



## CHAPTER 15

Moses and the Israelites sing a song to God. They praise the LORD for his glorious triumph. They recount the floods that covered the Egyptian chariots and God's majesty, fury, and strength in consuming them, contrasting this with Egyptian arrogance. They sing that there's no one like the LORD among the gods. He led his redeemed people with steadfast love, causing the leaders of other nations to tremble with fear. The LORD placed the people on his holy mountain and will reign there forever.

*This chapter consists of songs of praise by the newly liberated Israelites. Moses's song pictures God as a divine warrior who has both lovingly redeemed his people and powerfully defeated his enemies. The song also looks forward to God's future protective reign, which will allow his people to flourish. Such songs of victory appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (notably the Psalms) and the New Testament (especially Revelation, where God's final cosmic victory is celebrated).*



Aaron's sister Miriam, a prophet, takes a tambourine and sings a song. The rest of the women dance with her as she sings, "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

*Miriam leads the other women in singing a song that echoes the first line of Moses's song. Given women's resistance against Pharaoh in the early chapters of Exodus, it's fitting that the final escape from Pharaoh is followed by women's voices, too.*





Moses orders Israel to leave the Red Sea and enter the wilderness of Shur. After three days, they run out of water. When they reach Marah, they cannot drink the bitter water there. The people start to complain, Moses prays, and the LORD shows Moses a piece of wood. After Moses throws the wood into the water, the water becomes sweet. God also orders the people to listen carefully to his commandments; if they do so, he will spare them the diseases he brought on the Egyptians. After that, the people camp at Elim, a place with palm trees and springs of water.

*As the people of Israel venture into the wilderness, they immediately face challenges, suggesting that the defeat of Pharaoh is just the beginning. The people's lack of drinkable water leads them to grumble at Moses, a pattern of complaint established before the Red Sea and echoed throughout the desert wanderings. Though the people have just witnessed and celebrated God's sovereign power, that doesn't stop them from fearing for their future—showing that trust in God as a faithful deliverer isn't a one-time event, but something that must be cultivated over time.*



## CHAPTER 16

In the second month after the departure from Egypt, the Israelites set out from Elim and enter the wilderness of Sin. They start complaining to Moses and Aaron that it would have been better to die in Egypt; at least they weren't hungry there. So the LORD tells Moses that he will rain bread from heaven each day; the people must gather enough for each day. On the sixth day, God will provide enough bread for two days. This will also be a test of the Israelites' obedience.

*As the journey into the wilderness continues, the people find further occasion for grumbling—they're hungry. Their immediate desire for food even distorts their memories of Egyptian oppression. Nevertheless, God graciously provides for their survival through miraculous bread. The daily shower of bread establishes a pattern of relying on God day by day and also resting on appointed days (the seventh).*



Moses directs Aaron to address the Israelites, telling them that the LORD has heard the people's complaints. When Aaron speaks to them, the people see the glory of the LORD appearing in a cloud. God addresses the people directly, telling them they will have their fill of meat and bread, and they will know that he is the LORD.

*When God unleashed plagues on Egypt, his purpose was to make the Egyptians know his identity as the Lord. God's provision of food in the wilderness serves a similar purpose for the Israelites (albeit in the context of blessing instead of punishment). The people's continued grumbling shows that they still need this divine instruction.*



That evening, the Israelites' camp is covered with quails. The next morning, a layer of dew covers the camp. When the dew lifts, a fine substance coats the ground, like frost. The people ask each other, "What is it?" Moses explains that this is the bread that the LORD has sent. The people must gather it daily, enough for each person in their tents and only enough for one day at a time—they must not set aside any bread for the following day. But the people don't listen, and the next day, they find that their leftover bread is rotten and filled with worms.

*The name of the miraculous bread, "manna," sounds like the Hebrew words for "What is it?" The gathering of manna provides a daily lesson in trusting God—the people aren't supposed to hoard manna because this would suggest that they don't trust God to provide for them the following day. If they do it anyway, it will backfire spectacularly. Again, trusting God's deliverance is a process that requires patient divine training.*



On the sixth day—the eve of the Sabbath—they gather twice as much bread and prepare enough for the following day. The next day, the leftover bread is not spoiled. Though Moses tells the people that the LORD will not send bread on the Sabbath, some people still search for bread that day, and the LORD rebukes their disobedience.

*The only exception to the hoarding rule is the Sabbath. To avoid doing work on that day, the people are permitted to gather manna in advance. Note that the official law of Sabbath-keeping isn't given until later in Exodus; still, it's built into the pattern of Israelite life at an early stage in their journey.*



The Israelites call the bread “manna.” It is “like coriander seed [...] and the taste of it [is] like wafers made with honey.” Moses tells Aaron to preserve some manna in a jar, so that future generations will see how God sustained the people in the wilderness. The people eat manna for 40 years, until they reach the border of Canaan.

*Later, Aaron will place the preserved manna in the ark of the covenant, or tabernacle—the place of sacrifice and worship that hasn’t yet been built. Like the Passover, the jar of manna helps pass down the story of God’s deliverance and provision to the Israelites’ offspring, incorporating them into the same story.*



## CHAPTER 17

From the wilderness of Sin, the Israelites venture onward, traveling by stages. At Rephidim, there is no water, and the people complain to Moses. They accuse him of bringing them out of Egypt to die of thirst. When Moses asks the LORD what he should do with these people, the LORD tells him to go ahead of the people, taking along his staff and some of the elders. When Moses strikes the rock at Horeb, water will gush out. Moses does so, and he calls the place Massah and Meribah because the people tested God and quarreled with him..

*As the Israelites travel southeastward along the Sinai Peninsula, they complain to Moses for a third time. Despite God’s ongoing provision of food and water, the people still doubt that they’ll be adequately cared for. Exasperated with the people, Moses also needs reassurance that God will continue to be with him as he’s promised. The names Massah and Meribah mean testing and quarreling, respectively.*



Amalek attacks Israel at Rephidim. Moses orders Joshua to choose some men and fight Amalek, while Moses stands on the hill with staff in hand. While Joshua fights Amalek, Moses, Aaron, and Hur overlook the battle. Whenever Moses holds up his hand, Israel is winning; whenever he lowers it, Amalek is winning. When Moses’s arms get tired, he sits on a stone while Aaron and Hur hold up his arms. Joshua defeats Amalek, and Moses builds an altar called “The LORD is my banner” in commemoration.

*Besides learning to depend on God for basic daily survival, Israel also must learn to fight. The people of Amalek lived in the northern Sinai Peninsula. However, the battle’s outcome isn’t completely dependent on Israel’s strength—God fights through Moses. Though Moses’s direction of the battle further confirms his role as Israel’s leader, it also shows his human weakness. He’s not a superhuman figure, but must rely on God as his people do.*



## CHAPTER 18

Moses’s father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, hears what God has done for the Israelites. Moses has sent Zipporah and his sons Gershom and Eliezer to live with Jethro. When the Israelites are encamped at the mountain of God, Jethro brings Zipporah and her sons to see Moses. When Jethro hears the full story of how God has delivered the Israelites, he blesses the LORD and sacrifices to God; Aaron and the elders eat bread with Jethro, too.

*After a period of struggle and conflict, Moses shares a peaceful interlude with Jethro who, though he’s a Midianite (hence not an Israelite), recognizes God’s power and even worships him. Eating bread with Aaron and the elders is a sacred meal representing peaceful fellowship in God’s presence.*



The next day, Moses judges cases for the people from morning until evening. Jethro asks why Moses does this, and Moses explains that when the people have any dispute with one another, they come to him to inquire of God on their behalf. Jethro argues that Moses will wear himself out. He should continue representing the people before God and instructing them in God's ways, but he should appoint trustworthy men to serve as judges over groups of Israelites. The more important cases can be brought to Moses, but the burden will be reduced. Moses follows this advice, appointing judges over groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens.

*After dwelling together in the desert for this long, the Israelites would have plenty of disputes needing settlement. Seeing this, Jethro helps create a more sustainable system for dealing with these cases—the earliest organization of the people of Israel into a functioning nation. Life in the wilderness isn't just dependent on miracles; deliverance from slavery involves practical considerations, too.*



## CHAPTER 19

On the third new moon after the Israelites' departure from Egypt, they enter the wilderness of Sinai. They camp in front of the mountain there. The LORD calls to Moses from the mountain. Moses must tell the Israelites that because the LORD delivered them from the Egyptians, they must obey God and keep his covenant. Then the Israelites will be God's "treasured possession," "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." After hearing these things, the people swear that they will do everything the LORD tells them. The LORD says that he will come to the people in a dense cloud so that they'll hear what he says to Moses and will trust Moses's leadership.

*The second half of Exodus—chapters 19 through 40—focus on events at Mount Sinai and the revealing of God's law to Moses. In Chapter 3, God told Moses that the people would worship him at Mount Horeb (also called Mount Sinai) in the wilderness. Now they reach their goal. But first, God invites Israel to enter his covenant—meaning that because God has delivered them, they will obey him and live in a holy way, like priests (or representatives of God's holiness). However, God himself is so overwhelmingly holy that Moses must stand between God and the people, and God can't be directly seen (hence his appearance in cloud form).*



The LORD tells Moses to consecrate the people. This means that the people must wash their clothes; in three days the LORD will descend upon Mount Sinai in their sight. Therefore, the people must not touch the mountain; anyone who does will be put to death. So Moses consecrates the people, also warning them to abstain from sex for the next three days.

*Later in Exodus, God will give Moses instructions for building the tabernacle where God will be worshiped. By requiring the people to be "consecrated" (made holy), God teaches them that he demands holiness in personal behavior and reverence for his presence—things the people will have to learn before the tabernacle is in their midst. In the Hebrew Bible, just because an activity makes a person ritually impure (like sex) doesn't mean that action is considered to be morally wrong—something that's explained further in the next book (Leviticus).*



On the morning of the third day, the people hear thunder and lightning and see a thick cloud on the mountain. There's a loud trumpet blast. Then Moses brings the people to the foot of Mount Sinai to meet God. The mountain, shrouded with smoke, shakes violently, and God addresses Moses in the thunder. The LORD summons Moses to the top of the mountain and tells him to bring Aaron up too, and to warn the people not to try to break through the smoke to see God. Moses does these things.

*The sights and sounds coming from the mountain signify God's presence; they are meant to instill fear in the people, reminding them that God is untouchably holy and must not be casually approached. In fact, a mediator is required to stand between the people and God, which is why only Moses and his spokesman Aaron can draw closer to God.*



## CHAPTER 20

God addresses Israel through Moses, saying, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt [...] you shall have no other gods before me.”

*In this chapter, God gives Moses the Ten Commandments the people must live by. God prefaces the commandments by identifying himself as the God who delivered them—a reminder that God’s deliverance of the people comes first, and their obedience follows from God’s initiative in saving them. Because of this, it’s especially fitting that the people be loyal only to God, not worshipping any others.*



God commands the people not to make idols—whether they are in the form of anything in heaven, or on earth, or in the water under the earth. They must not worship such idols, because God is a jealous God.

*The second commandment’s prohibition of idols (images used in worship) is counter-cultural because surrounding nations—like Egypt and Canaan—often associated their deities with natural phenomena. The exodus events (like the plagues and sea crossing) showed that God is all-powerful over nature. Worshipping God in a physical form would suggest that his people don’t believe that.*



The people must not make “wrongful use” of God’s name.

*This third commandment basically prohibits using God’s name in any disrespectful manner, or in an attempt to sanction something unholy. From the way God revealed his name (Yahweh) to Moses, it’s clear that he takes his name seriously.*



They must remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. They have six days to accomplish all their work, but on the seventh day, neither they nor anyone in their households, their livestock, or aliens who live among them may do any work. This is because the LORD made all of creation in six days, then rested on the seventh.

*The fourth commandment officially recognizes something that God has already begun teaching the people—to honor him by refraining from work on the seventh day. They currently do this by not collecting manna on the Sabbath. Here, God bases the commandment on his own rest from the work of creation (in Genesis 2).*



The people must honor their father and mother, so that their days in the promised land may be long.

*The fifth commandment requires respect and care for one’s elders. The attached “promise” refers not just to a long lifespan, but to a life filled with God’s blessing.*



They must not murder, commit adultery, steal, or “bear false witness” against a neighbor. They also must not covet anything belonging to a neighbor.

*These commandments—the sixth through tenth—continue to deal not primarily with the people’s relationship to God (like the first four), but with their relationships with one another. “Bearing false witness” means speaking untruthfully about another person, especially in a way that perverts justice. Coveting means desiring what another person has.*



The people are frightened by the thunder and lighting, the smoking mountain, and the trumpet. They tell Moses that if God speaks to them, they will die. Moses reassures them—God is only testing them and making sure that the people fear him so they won’t sin.

*The thunder, lightning, and smoke probably remind the people of the plagues they saw in Egypt. The difference, as Moses explains, is that God was judging the Egyptians. Now, God is instilling reverent fear in the Israelites so that they can live with his blessing.*



The LORD tells Moses to instruct the Israelites that they must not make gods of silver or gold. They only need to make an earthen altar and offer burnt sacrifices on it. If they make stone altars, they must not use hewn stones, because chiseled stones are profaned. They also must not go up steps to the altar, so that human nakedness won’t be exposed upon the altar.

*At this point, Exodus moves from mostly narrative to mostly legislation (laws). While the Ten Commandments provide the broad outlines for behavior, more detailed laws are needed so that the Israelites can live together as a just society reflecting God’s own holy character. These laws are referred to as the Book of the Covenant. Sometimes, the justifications for specific laws aren’t clear (like the prohibition of chiseled stones). The prohibition of steps is probably connected to the risk of ritual impurity addressed in Chapter 19.*



## CHAPTER 21

God gives Moses further commands to give the people. If someone purchases a male Hebrew slave, that slave must be set free in their seventh year of service. The exception is if a slave freely decides to stay, out of love for his master, in which case the master should pierce the slave’s ear as a sign of this bond before God.

*The legislation assumes that Israelites might own slaves. This kind of slavery was different from the form known in U.S. history. There was a voluntary aspect: most commonly, people became slaves through debt, in which case enslaving a person could be seen as a merciful way of supporting them. However, masters are expected to remember their own enslavement in Egypt and treat slaves humanely.*



If a man sells his daughter as a slave, and she’s taken by her master as a wife, the master has no right to sell her to someone else just because she displeases him; that would be unjust. If he marries her to a son, she should be regarded as a daughter-in-law; or, if he takes an additional wife for himself, none of her rights should be diminished.

*Sometimes, a poor man might “sell” his daughter to a wealthy man because he couldn’t afford to provide for her. These laws are meant to protect such wives from exploitation.*



Anyone who willfully kills another person, kills or curses their mother or father, or kidnaps someone shall be put to death. If someone injures another person in a quarrel but doesn't kill them, they should merely compensate the person. If a slaveowner beats a slave to death, he should be punished. If a pregnant woman gets injured while people are fighting and subsequently suffers a miscarriage, the woman's husband may demand a fine, and if any further harm befalls her, the person who injured her must pay in kind ("life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth"). A slave whose eye or tooth is destroyed by their owner must be set free.

If an ox gores someone to death, the ox should be stoned to death, but the owner isn't liable unless the ox has gored someone in the past. In that case, the owner should also be put to death. A person who leaves a pit uncovered, resulting in the death of someone's animal, must make restitution. If someone's ox kills another's ox, then the live ox should be sold and its price divided between the two.

## CHAPTER 22

Laws are given for the restitution of a stolen ox or sheep. In cases where a thief is unable to make restitution for the theft, then the thief himself should be sold. Restitution should also be made in cases where livestock is let loose in someone else's field, where someone sets fire to a field, or where someone's goods are stolen from a neighbor's home. In cases of disputed ownership, or when an animal is killed or lost in another's safekeeping, the case should be brought before God, and "an oath" will determine which party must make restitution.

Next various social and religious laws are given. If a man has sex with a woman who's a virgin, he must give her father the bride-price for the couple to be married. Female sorcerers, or anyone who commits bestiality, must be put to death. Anyone who sacrifices to a god other than the LORD must be "devoted to destruction" (killed).

Israelites must not oppress resident foreigners, because they, too, were aliens in Egypt. They also must not abuse widows or orphans, whose cries God will hear and heed—their oppressors will face deadly wrath. When lending money to the poor, Israelites must not exact interest, and if they pawn their neighbor's cloak, they must restore it by sundown. God is compassionate and will hear the cries of the oppressed. Israelites must also refrain from reviling God or cursing their leaders.

*These laws deal with various kinds of physical harm. Again, the laws are meant to promote harmony in a young society figuring out how to live together in the wilderness. Many are intended to restrain cruelty and violence. There's also an emphasis on proportionality. For instance, the phrase "eye for [an] eye" (sometimes called the lex talionis, or law of retaliation) is actually meant to ensure that a punishment fits the crime, discouraging excessive acts of retribution.*



*These laws deal with property, especially livestock, which was vital to survival in an agricultural society. They emphasize individual responsibility and take various factors into account, like a person's prior knowledge of an animal's behavior.*



*These laws deal with matters like damage and theft. Again, livestock are key to people's livelihood and survival, hence the emphasis on things like wandering animals and rightful ownership. Laws often include the reminder that God is the lawgiver; indeed, God is even viewed as the judge of disputes. This reminds Israelites that they're supposed to take their obligation to holiness seriously.*



*It's worth remembering that all the laws in the Book of the Covenant are applications of the Ten Commandments. They were intended to help the Israelites live holy lives—rejecting the practices (like sorcery or worshipping other deities) of surrounding nations that didn't honor Israel's God. Some laws are specifically meant to protect the vulnerable (like a situation where a woman's sexual consent isn't clear).*



*God demands that his people remember their affliction while living in Egypt. This should lead them to treat vulnerable people, like foreigners and the poor, with justice and compassion. By acting this way, the Israelites will reflect God's own care for the oppressed.*



## CHAPTER 23

Israelites must not spread false reports, or side with the majority in lawsuits in ways which pervert justice. They also must not be partial to the poor in a lawsuit. If one sees their neighbor's ox or donkey going astray, they should bring it back. Even if one sees an enemy's donkey struggling under a burden, they should set the animal free. It's wrong to accept bribes, or to oppress resident foreigners, for "you know the heart of an alien."

After six years of sowing the land, the land should be allowed to lie fallow in the seventh; then the poor and wild animals may eat from the land. The people should spend six days doing their work, then resting on the seventh. The sabbath day allows their livestock, the slaves, and resident aliens to be refreshed.

Three times a year, there should be festivals to God—the festival of unleavened bread in the month of Abib, the festival of harvest, and the festival of ingathering. At these three annual festivals, all Israelite males must appear before God.

God promises to send an angel before the people to guide them to the promised land. If the people listen carefully and obey God's voice, God will oppose their enemies. When the angel brings the people to the Amorites, the Hittites, and the rest of the tribes of Canaan, and God destroys these peoples, the Israelites must not adopt their religious practices. They must worship the LORD their God instead, and he will bless them and cause their enemies to be driven out before them. The Israelites will then increase and possess the promised land. The borders of the land will go "from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates."

## CHAPTER 24

Then the LORD tells Moses to come up Mount Sinai, along with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and 70 elders of Israel. But only Moses should come near to God. Moses tells the people of Israel all the words of the LORD. The people vow to obey these words. Moses writes down God's words and, early the next morning, builds an altar at the foot of the mountain. After the young men of Israel offer sacrifices, Moses splashes the **blood** of the sacrifices against the altar. He reads the book of the covenant aloud to the people, then splashes blood on them, too, as a sign of the covenant God has made with them.

*This chapter's laws continue to emphasize justice, requiring Israelites to deal with disputes, enemies, and foreigners in ways that reflect God's compassionate character. Again, Israelites are called to remember that they know what it's like to be an "alien" living in a foreign land, so they shouldn't oppress foreigners, either.*



*Just as the Israelites' week is based on a pattern of work followed by rest (six workdays followed by the Sabbath), their agricultural practices should follow a similar pattern. Both weekly and seven-year patterns are opportunities to be compassionate to those who especially need food or rest.*



*The feast of unleavened bread refers to the Passover. Two additional festivals are introduced: the spring harvest festival, or Shavuot, and the fall ingathering festival, or Sukkot, which celebrates the gathering up of that which has grown in the fields.*



*As elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the "angel" might refer to God himself—in any case, the people must obey the angel as if he were God. These commands look ahead to Israel's eventual conquest of the promised land of Canaan. Perhaps the most important is that the Israelites must not take on the religious beliefs of the people currently living in Canaan. Adopting these would destroy Israel's distinctiveness as a people. Doing so would also be a failure to acknowledge God as the very one who led the Israelites into the promised land. The "sea of the Philistines" is the Mediterranean Sea, and the "wilderness" refers to the desert south of Israel.*



Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and 70 elders ascend Mount Sinai, and they see God. The men eat and drink in God's presence. Then the LORD summons Moses up the mountain to receive tablets of stone, upon which God's law is written. Moses takes Joshua and heads up the mountain. The glory of the LORD settles on top of the mountain in the form of a cloud. To the people below, it looks like a "devouring fire." Moses enters the cloud for 40 days and 40 nights.

*The second covenant confirmation takes place through a special meal which Moses, Aaron, Aaron's sons, and other elders eat in God's presence. Since it's stated elsewhere in Exodus that nobody can see God and remain alive, "seeing God" might refer to some kind of partial vision. The third confirmation occurs when Moses alone ascends Mount Sinai and enters the glorious "cloud" symbolizing God's presence. This shows that only Moses occupies the role of mediator between the Israelites and God.*



## CHAPTER 25

The LORD tells Moses to tell the Israelites—all those "whose hearts prompt them"—to bring an offering. The offering should be of gold, silver, and bronze; of blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine linen; leather, acacia wood, oil, spices, and gems. With these items, the people are to build God a sanctuary, so that he can dwell among them.

*Chapter 25 is the beginning of a long section in which God gives Moses detailed instructions for worship. The end result will be a sanctuary, or tabernacle, where the people can meet with God even in the midst of their desert journey. The materials for God's tabernacle will be voluntarily given by the people themselves. Presumably, some of these materials were those "plundered" from the Egyptians before the exodus.*



God gives Moses specific instructions for the building of the tabernacle. First, they should build an ark out of acacia wood, overlaid with gold. They should also make golden rings and poles by which the ark may be carried. The covenant will be placed inside the ark.

*The sanctuary, or tabernacle, should first include an "ark," or a throne for God. This will be the holiest part of the tabernacle. Eventually, the ark will contain the tablets on which the Ten Commandments are written (hence the better-known phrase Ark of the Covenant). The ark should be portable for the journey.*



They must also make a mercy seat of gold. At its two ends should be golden cherubim, their wings overshadowing the mercy seat. The cherubim should be facing each other. The mercy seat should be on top of the ark. God will meet with the people, speaking to them from above the mercy seat and between the two cherubim on the ark of the covenant.

*The "mercy seat" is essentially a cover for the ark. Cherubim were depicted in ancient art as winged, lion-like angels with human faces, often guarding sacred places. Their presence on the ark indicates the great holiness of this location: the spot from which God will address humanity.*



They should also build a table out of acacia wood. It, too, should be overlaid with gold and carried by means of golden poles. They should also make dishes for incense and bowls for drink offerings, all these out of gold. The bread of the presence should always be set on the table before God.

*The "holy place" (outside the most holy place that houses the ark of the covenant) contains several golden items. One of them is the table for the bread of the presence. The following book of the Hebrew Bible, Leviticus, stipulates that 12 flat loaves of bread (representing Israel's 12 tribes) should always be kept on this table.*





Finally, they should make a lampstand of gold. The lampstand should have six branches going out of it, three on each side. The cups on the branches should be shaped like almond blossoms. There should be seven lamps on the lampstand, throwing light in front of the lampstand. All of these things should be made according to the pattern God shows to Moses on the mountain.

*The golden lampstand, the second gold item in the holy place, serves to light the tabernacle while the priests minister there. Its treelike shape is probably meant to symbolize the tree of life in the Garden of Eden (in the Book of Genesis, Chapter 3).*



## CHAPTER 26

The tabernacle should have curtains of fine linen and blue, purple, and crimson yarns. Cherubim should be worked into the design. The curtains should be joined together with golden clasps. Eleven curtains of goats' hair should be joined together, using bronze clasps, to form a tent over the tabernacle. There should also be a covering made of tanned rams' skins and a leather outer covering. God also gives instructions for eight acacia wood frames for the tabernacle. Then the tabernacle should be erected according to the plan shown to Moses on the mountain.

*This section lays out details for constructing the tabernacle's curtains and frames. The use of cherubim imagery and gold convey the sacredness and high value of the tabernacle in Israel's life—it is God's dwelling place. In the Garden of Eden, cherubim barred Adam and Eve from the tree of life from which they were forbidden to eat. The curtains' cherubim design might be a similar warning against unauthorized entrance.*



Finally, a curtain of blue, purple, and crimson yarn and fine linen, with cherubim worked into it, should be hung on four acacia wood pillars overlaid with gold. The ark of the covenant should be placed within the curtain. The curtain will serve to separate the holy place from the most holy place. The mercy seat should be placed on the ark of the covenant in the most holy place. The table should be outside the curtain, on the north side of the tabernacle; the lampstand should be on the south side. The entrance to the tent should also have an embroidered screen.

*This section explains the tabernacle's floor plan. The key element is the distinction between the most holy place (containing the ark of the covenant) and the holy place (containing the table of the bread of the presence and the lampstand). The richly colored curtain, decorated with solemn cherubim imagery, ensures that the separation between these sections is clear.*



## CHAPTER 27

The Israelites should make an altar out of acacia wood. It should be square, and on its corners should be horns, overlaid with bronze. The altar should also have pots to receive the ashes, with various utensils of bronze, and bronze poles so that the altar may be carried.

*This altar will later be described as the “altar of burnt offering.” Priests will offer sacrifices here on the people's behalf, making it one of the most important locations for Israel's religious practice. It's located just outside the tabernacle.*



The tabernacle should also have a court. The court should have twenty bronze pillars and bases and hangings of fine linen. The gate should have an embroidered screen of blue, purple, and crimson and fine linen. Finally, the Israelites should bring pure olive oil to fuel the lamps. In the tent of meeting, outside the curtain, Aaron and his sons must tend the lamp from evening to morning; it will be a “perpetual ordinance” observed by all generations.

*The tabernacle's outer area is called the court. It includes the altar of burnt offering. This area is elaborately decorated to match the colors and materials within, the overall scheme reminding people both inside and outside of the tabernacle's holiness. This section ends with instructions regarding the lampstand in the holy place; like the tabernacle itself, its oil is to be supplied by the Israelites themselves.*



## CHAPTER 28

God instructs Moses to gather his brother Aaron and Aaron's sons—Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar— to serve the LORD as priests. Sacred vestments should be made for Aaron's "glorious adornment." The vestments must include a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a checkered tunic, a turban, and a sash. All these should be made of gold; blue, purple, and crimson yarns; and fine linen.

The ephod should have two shoulder-pieces. On these pieces should be two onyx stones; on the stones, the names of the 12 sons of Israel should be engraved, with six names on one and six on the other. When Aaron wears the ephod, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel on his shoulders before the LORD.

There should also be a "breastpiece of judgment" made in the same style as the ephod. The breastpiece should contain four rows of precious stones, three stones in each row, each engraved with the name of one of the 12 tribes of Israel. The breastpiece should be attached to the ephod by golden cords. In this way, Aaron will bear the names of the sons of Israel on his heart when he enters the holy place. The breastpiece should also contain the Urim and Thummim, by which Aaron will continually bear the judgment of the Israelites before God.

The ephod's robe should be blue, with pomegranates around the hem, alternating with golden bells. When Aaron ministers in the holy place before the LORD, the bells will sound, so that he won't die. Aaron's turban should have a golden rosette with "Holy to the LORD" engraved on it. The rosette will be on Aaron's forehead, and he will personally take on any guilt that is incurred in the Israelites' offering. That way the Israelites will always find favor before the LORD.

*After giving the specifications for the tabernacle, Exodus turns to those who will serve within it. Not just anyone can do so; because of God's holiness, only specific men among the Israelites are set apart to minister as priests (much as Israel itself is especially set apart by God as a "royal priesthood" among nations). The priests' "glorious" vestments, matching the tabernacle colors, convey the holiness of their work.*



*Like the tabernacle furniture, the parts of the priests' vestments have symbolic meanings. The ephod is an apron-like garment. The appearance of the tribes' names on the shoulder-pieces shows that Israel is precious to God, and also that Aaron is Israel's representative before God.*



*The breastpiece, too, contains the names of Israel's 12 tribes, a further reminder of whom Aaron represents. The meaning of "Urim and Thummim" is less clear; the function of these elements is not explained, although later books of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament refer to these objects as being used to seek God's will when making decisions.*



*It's not exactly clear how the sounding of the bells keeps Aaron from dying. The point is that priesthood is sacred work, and that Aaron should never act carelessly while serving in the tabernacle. Perhaps the ringing of the bells reminds him to be intentional in all his actions while within the tabernacle. The message engraved on Aaron's turban is a reminder that Aaron is set apart as God's holy servant, representing the Israelites before God (that is, he bears the people's guilt in God's presence and bears God's blessing back to the people).*



Like Aaron, Aaron's sons should also have tunics, sashes, and headdresses for their "glorious adornment." Aaron and his sons should be dressed in these vestments and then anointed, ordained, and consecrated, so that they may serve God as priests. They should also be given linen undergarments to wear, or else they will incur guilt.

*The linen undergarments prevent the exposure of any nakedness within the tabernacle (also a concern back in Chapter 20). In Genesis, nakedness—namely the need to cover it up— was associated with the guilt of humanity's fall and expulsion from the Garden; perhaps that's being referred to here. All of this goes to show that priests were expected to embody the utmost holiness while serving before God.*



## CHAPTER 29

To consecrate the priests, the Israelites should take a young bull, two rams, unleavened bread, unleavened cakes mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers spread with oil. At the entrance to the tent of meeting, Aaron and his sons should be washed with water. Then Aaron should be dressed in the sacred vestments, and anointing oil should be poured on his head. His sons should be ordained likewise.

*This section describes the actions that must be taken in order to ordain Aaron and his sons—set them apart for priestly service. This consecration won't take place until after the tabernacle has been built. Parts of the ordination ritual, like sacrificial offerings, anticipate the kinds of rituals they will later conduct on the people's behalf.*



The bull should then be brought in front of the tent of meeting. Aaron and his sons should lay their hands on its head, and it should be slaughtered. Some of the bull's **blood** should be placed on the horns of the altar by Moses, and the rest of the blood poured out at the altar's base. The fat, the liver, and the kidneys should be burned on the altar, while its flesh, skin, and dung are burned outside the camp as a sin offering.

*The bull is offered as a sin offering (or purification offering)—laying hands on its head symbolizes the transfer of the people's guilt or impurity onto the animal. The offering's blood purifies the new altar (the "horns" are projections on the altar's four corners; their symbolism isn't otherwise explained).*



One of the rams should be sacrificed in similar fashion. After it's killed, its parts should be burned on the altar, a pleasing odor offered by fire to the LORD. After the other ram is sacrificed, Moses should smear a bit of its **blood** on Aaron's and his sons' right ears, right thumbs, and right big toes. The rest of the blood should be dashed on the altar. Some of this blood and some anointing oil should be sprinkled on Aaron and his sons and their vestments.

*One of the rams is sacrificed as a burnt offering. (Later, Leviticus explains that such offerings atone for the sin of the person who offers them.) The smearing and sprinkling of blood purifies Aaron, the other priests, the altar, and the vestments, cleansing everything for service before the Lord. The whole ritual is marked by vivid sensory details—pleasing smells, bright colors, blood everywhere—that conveys the sacredness of the tabernacle and the idea that people's impurities are costly, requiring the shedding of blood.*



Then the fat of the ram of ordination, as well as a loaf of bread, a cake, and a wafer should be placed in the hands of Aaron and his sons, and they should raise these items as an elevation offering before God before they are burned on the altar. Likewise, the ram's breast and thigh should be raised before the LORD. Aaron and his sons should eat the ram's boiled flesh, along with the bread, at the entrance to the tent of meeting. This ordination process will take seven days, and a bull should be offered on each of the seven days as a sin offering. The altar will also be consecrated and made holy.

*In this part of the ordination ritual, the priests actually eat parts of the sacrificial offerings. This looks ahead to a later practice called the peace offering, described in Leviticus, where people would eat part of a sacrifice as a sign of thanksgiving or fellowship with God, reserving part of the food for the priests. Again, the intricacy of this week-long ordination process shows that the tabernacle and priesthood are central to Israel's life. The tabernacle is the place where God dwells in the people's midst, and the priesthood stands between the people and God, allowing the people to access God's blessing.*



Each day, two-year-old lambs should be offered on the altar, one in the morning and one in the evening. This will be a regular burnt offering, an ongoing ceremony. God will meet with the Israelites in the tent of meeting, and his glory will sanctify the place. God will dwell among the Israelites and be their God, and they will know that he is their God who brought them out of Egypt.

*The tabernacle will have twice-daily sacrifices, a reminder of the continual need for purity in the presence of such a holy God. Yet all these preparations and sacrifices allow the people to live close to God—the whole reason that God brought them from Egypt in the first place.*



## CHAPTER 30

God commands the people to make an altar where they can offer incense. It should be made of acacia wood overlaid with gold, with poles for carrying. The altar of incense should be placed in front of the curtain that will be placed above the ark of the covenant and in front of the mercy seat. Every morning and evening, Aaron must offer incense on the altar. Once a year, Aaron must perform a rite of atonement on the horns of the altar, using the blood of the sin offering.

*Like the table for the bread of the presence and the lampstand, the incense altar is one of the golden objects in the tabernacle's holy place. Along with daily burnt offerings and tending the lampstand, Aaron's daily duties also include burning incense. This section also mentions the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, which will be fully explained in Leviticus 16.*



The LORD instructs Moses to collect a half shekel from each Israelite age 20 or older when they are registered in the census. This is “a ransom for their lives” so that no plague will come upon the people. The collected money will be designated for the service of the tent of meeting.

*It isn't explained why a plague must be averted by means of a monetary offering when a census is taken. Perhaps it's so that the people won't take pride in their numbers rather than depending on God (a situation that comes up later in Israel's history, under King David).*



The LORD tells Moses to make a bronze basin and stand for washing. It will go between the tent of meeting and the altar. Whenever Aaron and his sons approach the tent to minister, they must wash their hands and feet in the basin, so that they won't die.

*The bronze basin, to be placed outside the tabernacle, has a very pragmatic function—a place for the priests to wash so that they can approach God as reverently as possible.*



The LORD tells Moses to take the finest spices—myrrh, cinnamon, cane, and cassia—and mix them with olive oil to make a holy anointing oil. He must take this oil and anoint the tent, the ark of the covenant, the table, the lampstand, the altar of incense, and all the utensils. Then the objects will be holy, and whatever touches them will become holy. It will also be used to consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve as priests. The LORD tells Moses to take other sweet spices and beat them into a powder. Part of this incense should be put before the covenant in the tent of meeting. No one else may make or use a perfume from the same ingredients.

*Anointing oil and incense will serve important functions in and around the tabernacle, both in the initial consecration of people and objects and in daily worship. This is why such substances must not be made or used for other purposes—these things and individuals are holy to God, so they, too, must be used only for specific tasks.*



## CHAPTER 31

The LORD tells Moses that he has appointed two artisans, Bezalel and Oholiab, to make all the things God has commanded, from the ark of the covenant to the vestments and the incense. God has given these men “divine spirit,” knowledge, and skill to carry out what he has commanded.

*Although all the Israelites have the opportunity to contribute materials for the tabernacle and its special objects, specific artisans have been chosen and equipped by God to make the objects.*



The LORD tells Moses to speak to the Israelites and tell them that they must keep the Sabbath. This will be a sign between them and God for all generations, so that they may know that the LORD sanctifies them. Everyone who does not keep the sabbath, who profanes it by doing work, must be cut off from the people and put to death. It is a perpetual sign that the LORD spent six days creating and rested on the seventh. When God finishes giving Moses these commands on Mount Sinai, God gives him two tablets of stone; the commandments are written on the tablets by the finger of God.

*This section pauses from giving building instructions to remind the Israelites of another feature of their holy lifestyle: keeping the Sabbath. While this observance has been discussed before, here it’s specifically tied to the rest that God’s took after completing the work of creation. Thus, keeping the Sabbath is a way of imitating God. It also distinguishes the Israelites from other peoples, which is why the death penalty is incurred for Sabbath-breaking. With this dramatic conclusion, God’s instructions to Moses come to an end.*



## CHAPTER 32

Meanwhile, the Israelites wait for Moses to come down the mountain. When Moses is delayed, the people go to Aaron and ask him to make gods for them. After all, they say, who knows what’s become of Moses? So Aaron tells the people to remove their gold jewelry and bring it to him. Aaron gathers and molds the gold into the image of a calf. Then he tells the Israelites that this is their god who brought them out of Egypt. The next day, the people hold a festival, offering sacrifices to the image and feasting and celebrating before it.

*In between the instructions for the tabernacle and its actual building, this narrative section shows why the tabernacle is necessary: the people are prone to breaking their covenant with God and need a constant site on which to focus their worship. At this point, Moses has been on Mount Sinai for several weeks. Already inclined to forgetfulness and grumbling, the people decide they need a god closer to them whom they can see. It’s not clear why Aaron gives in to this demand so willingly, but it does make it clear why Moses is the leader and not him.*



The LORD tells Moses to go down from the mountain immediately because the people are already turning aside from what he commanded them. God sees how stubborn the people are. His wrath burns against them, and he intends to destroy them, making a great nation from Moses alone. However, Moses argues with God. He points out that if God destroys the Israelites, the Egyptians will say that this was God's intention all along. He begs God to remember his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God changes his mind.

*When God is furious with the rebellious Israelites, Moses argues on the people's behalf. He does so on the basis of what God himself had already promised—to deliver Israel from Egypt out of faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham, and to show that he is truly God. This also shows how much Moses has grown as a leader since God first addressed him from the burning bush. His faithfulness to God's purposes echoes God's own character. He also has no interest in becoming the head of his own dynasty, showing his humble nature.*



Then Moses goes down the mountain, carrying the two tablets that God engraved. Moses and Joshua hear the noise of the people's festival. When Moses reaches the camp and sees the people dancing around the golden calf, he throws down the tablets in anger. Then he burns the golden calf, grinds it to a powder, throws the powder into water, and makes the people drink the water.

*The smashing of the two tablets is a dramatic visualization of the people's breach of the covenant. The reason for consuming the powdered gold isn't explained, but it's definitely a punishment, and making the people digest the idol is also a good way of making sure that it's destroyed once and for all!*



Moses asks Aaron why he permitted this to happen. Aaron tells Moses that the people were determined to do evil, and it wasn't his fault. Moses stands at the gate of the camp and calls to the people, summoning those who are on the LORD's side. Levi's sons gather around him. Moses orders them to kill their brothers, friends, and neighbors with the sword. They obey, and about 3,000 people die. Moses tells Levi's sons that by this act, they have ordained themselves for the LORD's service.

*In contrast to Moses, who speaks up on his people's behalf and takes decisive action against the rebellious, Aaron immediately deflects blame, showing that ordained priests aren't necessarily morally exemplary. God punishes the rebellious through the Levites. They are willing to turn against their own tribe, and this zeal for God qualifies them to serve as priests.*



The next day, Moses tells the people that they've sinned greatly, but he will attempt to make atonement for them. He returns to the LORD's presence and says that if God will not forgive the people, then he should blot Moses himself out of the book of life. But the LORD refuses. He tells Moses to lead the people onward, and he will punish their sin later. Then he sends a plague on the people for making the golden calf.

*Though a subset of people were killed for disobedience, all the Israelites bear guilt for the golden calf incident. Once again, Moses steps forward as the Israelites' representative and tells God to condemn him instead of the people. (The phrase "book of life" shows up in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament to refer to a divine record of those who will enjoy God's blessings.) God heeds Moses, sending a lesser punishment instead.*



## CHAPTER 33

The LORD orders Moses to lead the people out of Sinai; it's time to go to the land God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the land flowing with **milk and honey**. However, God will not accompany them, because they are "a stiff-necked people." The people grieve because of this.

*As Israel finally moves on from Mount Sinai, in fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham, God tells Moses that he will not go with such a stubborn, rebellious people. In the past, the Israelites met obstacles like hunger or battle, but now the obstacle to progress is their own misdeeds.*



Whenever Moses goes out to the tent of meeting, and the people see the pillar of cloud descending and standing at the entrance to the tent, the people bow down at the entrances of their own tents. At the tent of meeting, Moses speaks to God “face to face, as one speaks to a friend.” Then Moses returns to the camp while Joshua remains at the tent of meeting.

*Moses goes to the tent of meeting (a temporary tabernacle, as the permanent one hasn't been built yet) to speak to God about this obstacle. In contrast to the beginning of Exodus, when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, Moses now approaches God like a “friend.” He has grown stronger in his role as a stand-in between God and the people.*



Moses tells the LORD that before leading the people to the promised land, he wants to see God’s ways, so that he may know God and find favor with him. He doesn’t want to travel onward without God’s presence. He prays that God will show him his glory. The LORD says he will grant Moses’s request. He will cause his goodness to pass before Moses, but he will not let Moses see his face, because nobody can see it and live. While the LORD passes by, he will hide Moses in the cleft of a rock; that way, Moses can see God’s back but not his face.

*Moses knows that he can only lead the Israelites if God favors him. He boldly requests to look upon God directly, as confirmation of God’s favor, and God graciously allows him a small glimpse. God’s sheer holiness would be too overpowering for Moses.*



## CHAPTER 34

The LORD tells Moses to cut two new tablets of stone, like the ones he broke, and God will write the commandments on them. The next morning, Moses goes up Mount Sinai alone with the stone tablets. The LORD descends in the cloud and proclaims to Moses his name, “the LORD.” While he passes before Moses, he proclaims himself to be “slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [...] but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children.” Moses bows before the LORD in worship and begs him to pardon the “stiff-necked” Israelites and accompany them to the promised land.

*God renews his covenant with Israel. Like the first time God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, God prefaces this event by announcing his name and character, but this time he goes into more detail about both his “steadfast love” and his wrath against “iniquity.” This description of God’s character is echoed several times throughout the Hebrew Bible. Moses agrees with God about the people’s stubbornness, and on that basis, he asks for God to go with them to the promised land.*



The LORD makes a covenant with the people. He will drive out the foreign nations before Israel. They must tear down those people’s altars, because they must worship no other God, and they must not intermarry with the foreigners. They must not make idols, they must keep the Passover, redeem their firstborn, and keep the sabbath. The LORD commands Moses to write down the words of the covenant. Moses is with the LORD, fasting, for 40 days and 40 nights.

*God restates some of the items that accompanied the first giving of the Ten Commandments, especially those having to do with foreigners and religious observances. Given the people’s idolatry with the golden calf, these commands probably bear repeating! The sequence of 40 days and nights corresponds to the period of time Moses spent on Mount Sinai the first time.*



When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with the stone tablets in hand, his face is shining because he has been talking with God. Aaron and the Israelites are afraid to come near him. But Moses calls to them and tells them what God commands them. Afterward, he puts a veil over his face. Whenever he goes before the LORD, he removes the veil, and whenever he comes to speak God’s words to the Israelites, he covers his face again.

*Because of Moses’s encounter with God’s glory on Sinai, the glory is reflected through him to the people, confirming to them that he has been with God and that the Ten Commandments are divinely authorized. As a mediator or representative, Moses intercedes for sinful people in God’s presence, and he mediates God’s glorious presence to sinful people.*



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## CHAPTER 35

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Moses gathers the Israelites together and tells them the LORD's commandments. He repeats the Sabbath command and tells the people to bring offerings for the construction of the tabernacle. The people, everyone "whose heart was stirred," bring gold objects, yarn, fine linen, and the rest of the things needed for the building of the tabernacle, its furnishings, and its utensils. Skilled women spin yarn and goats' hair, and others bring precious stones and spices. Moses also tells the people that Bezalel and Oholiab have been especially gifted and called to build the tabernacle.

*The renewal of the covenant concludes. Moses lays special stress on worship, reminding the people of their Sabbath obligation and encouraging them to contribute to the construction of the tabernacle. In contrast to their rebellious idol-worship weeks earlier, the people eagerly put their gifts and skills to God's use. The Israelites have grown in their trust and obedience of God, albeit in fits and starts.*



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## CHAPTER 36

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Bezalel, Oholiab, and other skilled and willing artisans gather the people's freewill offerings; the people have brought so much that they must be ordered to stop. Then the artisans begin making the tabernacle, its curtains, its ram-skin and leather coverings, its wooden frames, pillars, and screen.

*This chapter simply narrates the artisans' work as they follow the instructions Moses brought from God for the tabernacle construction. The intricate details convey the belief that God shouldn't be worshiped in a glib or improvised way (like cobbling together a golden calf), but according to his commands.*



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## CHAPTER 37

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Bezalel makes the ark out of acacia wood, overlaid with gold; the mercy seat with cherubim on either side; the table for the bread of the presence; the lampstand; the altar of incense; and the anointing oil. All of these things are made according to the specifications the LORD gave Moses.

*The artisan Bezalel crafts the items that will be used inside the tabernacle, again following God's instructions. He begins at the heart of the sanctuary (the tabernacle's most holy place, where God will meet with the people) and works outward.*



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## CHAPTER 38

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Bezalel makes the altar of burnt offering with its four bronze horns. He makes all the utensils for the altar and poles for carrying it. He also makes a basin and stand for washing, using the mirrors of the women who serve at the entrance to the tent of meeting. Bezalel also makes the tabernacle's court, with linen hangings on each side and bronze pillars with silver hooks. He also makes a finely embroidered screen for the tabernacle. Oholiab assists with the engraving, designing, and embroidering.

*Bezalel makes the items that will sit outside the tabernacle, allowing the priests to serve and the people to bring their offerings. The role of the women servants isn't elaborated, but it's clear that all Israelites had a stake in the building of the tabernacle. Finally, the outer court is constructed, too.*





## CHAPTER 39

The artisans also make the vestments for Aaron—the ephod, breastpiece with engraved precious stones, robe with alternating pomegranates and bells, tunics, and headdresses. The headdress includes an inscribed rosette that says, “Holy to the LORD.” All of this is done just as the LORD commanded Moses.

All of the work for the tabernacle of the tent of meeting is completed in this way. All of the items for the tabernacle are brought to Moses. When Moses sees that the Israelites have done this work just as the LORD commanded them, he blesses them.

## CHAPTER 40

The LORD tells Moses that on the first day of the first month, he must set up the tabernacle of the tent of meeting. It must contain the ark of the covenant, the table, the lampstand, the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with the basin before it. The court must be set up around these things. Everything within must be anointed so that it will be holy. Aaron and his sons, too, must be washed and consecrated, then dressed so that they may serve as priests.

Moses does just as the LORD commands. In the second year, on the first day of the month, he sets up the tabernacle, spreads the tent over it, and covers the tent. He puts the covenant inside the ark, puts poles on the ark, and sets the mercy seat above it. He brings the ark of the covenant inside the tabernacle and puts the screen in front of it. He puts the table inside and places bread on it before the LORD. He sets up the lampstand, the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with the basin. Whenever the priests enter the tent, they wash before approaching the altar. Moses sets up the court around the tabernacle and altar and adds the screen at the gate of the court. Then his work is finished.

Then the cloud covers the tent of meeting, and the LORD’s glory fills the tabernacle. Moses is not able to enter the tent because of the LORD’s presence. Whenever the cloud goes up from the tabernacle, the Israelites set out on the next stage of their journey. If the cloud is not taken up, they stay where they are. The cloud is on the tabernacle during the day, and **fire** is in the cloud at night, so that Israel can see it at every stage of their journey.

*Now that the tabernacle is constructed, its priests must be outfitted. Again, the artisans follow God’s instructions exactly, showing the importance of the priesthood exactly meeting God’s specifications for holiness and their role as the “bridge” between God and the rest of Israel.*



*As God’s representative to the people (and vice versa), Moses confirms that the people have fulfilled God’s commands.*



*Now that the tabernacle has been built, God reminds Moses how to set it up, consecrate it so it can be used, and ordain the priests to begin serving there. Though these details are the same as before, their repetition highlights the sacredness of these objects and rituals.*



*It’s now nine months since the Israelites first arrived at Mount Sinai. After several glorious encounters with God, teaching the people how to obey God, dealing with the people’s rebellion, and building the structures needed in order to worship God, Moses assembles the temple, making it possible for God to dwell among his people at last.*



*At the beginning of Exodus, God appears to Moses in a burning bush, calling him to lead the people out of Egypt. At the end of the book, God is with all the Israelites, appearing to them in cloud and fire as they journey toward their promised home. God has delivered the people according to his covenant, and they obediently follow him, worshiping him alone as their god.*





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